

The Permanence of John Dos Passos

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The Thirteenth Character

*Dos Passos' U.S.A.—
The Thirteenth Character*



Nineteen-ninety-six marked the centenary of John Dos Passos' birth. Moreover, it marked the sixtieth anniversary of the publication of *The Big Money*, the third volume of his remarkable trilogy *U.S.A.*, which included the earlier *The 42nd Parallel* (1930) and *Nineteen Nineteen* (1932). And on August 5, 1996, the *New Yorker* published an article called "U.S.A. Today," by the essayist Joseph Epstein. There he gave Dos Passos credit for awakening him to politics but declared that the novelist was for his own time, and would not endure—ironically, the *New Yorker* never published anything by Dos Passos during his own time. Dos Passos' characters "did not stick," Epstein wrote. Today, he added, academia determines whether or not an author will continue to be read. But there is no newsletter for Dos Passos scholarship, nor are there successive editions of less and less significant material by him. He has descended—"poof!"—down the history hole."

Wasn't that where Melville descended—"poof!"—not long after he published *Moby Dick*?

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Like Epstein, I shall speak almost entirely about *U.S.A.* To give it full attention, I shall omit any discussion of Dos Passos' novel *Manhattan Transfer* (1925), his essayistic travel books *Rosinante to the Road Again* (1922) and *Orient Express* (1927), and other important books by him.

U.S.A. is an astonishing work for many reasons. It has a dozen major characters—all of whom have stuck in my mind since my first reading. We get to know the twelve better than the people in our own lives. Though the narratives about these characters are often not contiguous, they give us virtual case histories. Or rather they do so when supplemented by the narratives about other major characters whose lives impinge on theirs.

U.S.A. also has a thirteenth character, who sticks like Krazy Glue. But more of this later.

Of the twelve major characters, four live in the shadow of another, a smooth, hollow opportunist named J. Ward Moorehouse. We follow his life from birth—some years before Dos Passos' own—through his creating a pioneering public relations firm in New York City before World War I, his becoming a dominant figure in his field, and his suffering a heart attack in middle age. Around him are his worshipful secretary, Janey Williams; his friend Eleanor Stoddard, a socially ambitious interior decorator, as opportunistic as Moorehouse himself; Eleanor's friend Evelyn Hutchins, who becomes known for her parties, attended by "interesting people"—writers, labor leaders, radical leftists, celebrities, etc.; and Richard Ellsworth Savage, a Harvard-educated associate in Moorehouse's firm, who once held literary and pacifist ideals.

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The other seven major characters are "Daughter," a young Texan who has an affair with Savage in France during the war, and gets a brush-off from him after she becomes pregnant; the merchant seaman Joe Williams, Janey's brother; Mac, an I.W.W. member, most of whose story is told in the first seven narrative sections of *The 42nd Parallel*; Ben Compton and Mary French, two left-radical characters, he the son of a Jewish watchmaker in Brooklyn, and she the daughter of a physician in Colorado; Charley Anderson, a midwestern mechanic who becomes a decorated airman during the war and then goes to work in the airplane manufacturing business; and Margo Dowling, an actress.

The life of the seaman Joe Williams is a naturalistic novelette as well as a case history. A reader may speculate on how Joe is affected by the frequent beatings he receives from his father. His death, in the second volume, is due to his combativeness as well as to the anti-black prejudice instilled in him at home. And the reader may link his miserable career to his having to leave high school at the end of his freshman year. Joe is a simple man who lacks smarts. It is painful to find him returning from a sea voyage with gifts for Janey (who completed high school, taking the commercial course, and now works for Moorehouse), and her not asking him up to the apartment she shares with friends, lest she be declassified by her brother's rough appearance.

Charley Anderson's story, told in one narrative section of *The 42nd Parallel* and seven sections of *The Big Money*, is another naturalistic novelette. A war hero and

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a mechanic who can help design airplanes, Charley is in a position to go after great wealth after the war. Joining an aircraft manufacturing corporation in Detroit, he finds himself drawn into stock manipulation—"competing against the sharks," to use a later phrase—and that competition, sexual frustration in his marriage, and heavy drinking lead to his deterioration, and finally his death in an automobile accident.

While the stories of Joe Williams and Charley Anderson are naturalistic novelettes, that of Margo Dowling, told in five sections of *The Big Money*, is a picaresque one. Margo lives by her wits as her life alternates between good and bad fortune. Her mother died giving birth to her, and she was brought up in New York by her mother's friend Agnes, who married Margo's father. When he becomes a hopeless alcoholic and the family is impoverished, Agnes sets up housekeeping with an actor, who gets Margo a job in vaudeville when she is a child, and rapes her when she is pubescent. Margo, after having willing sex with two other men, induces a young Cuban guitarist to marry her, and goes to Havana with him. He turns out to be a homosexual, and besides gives her syphilis, and a baby who is born blind and dies. Escaping from her husband, with the aid of a young U.S. consular clerk—to whom she probably gives syphilis in turn—she goes back to New York, and there gets a job as a chorus girl in the Ziegfeld Follies. She next comes close to marrying a rich Yale undergraduate, with whom she cruises to Florida. When the relationship ends abruptly, she lives with Charley Anderson, whom she has met there. Soon after his death,

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she and Agnes—and Margo's husband, for whom she has sent—drive from Miami to Los Angeles. After three years of playing bit parts in the movies, she encounters Sam Margolies, a director who became infatuated with her when she was a model he photographed in a dress shop. He makes her a movie star and marries her.

Much of the Margo Dowling and Charley Anderson stories are told in nearby and often successive chapters of *The Big Money*, and we view Charley from Margo's perspective and Margo from Charley's. Similar multiple perspectives exist among other characters. Double visions—from within a given character, evidenced in the very vocabulary of the prose depicting him or her, and then from without, in the minds of other characters, in their own narrative sections—contribute to the brilliance and depth of *U.S.A.*

Interspersed amid the sections on the lives of the twelve major fictional characters, we get sections of three literary devices: "Newsreel," consisting of newspaper headlines, bits of newspaper stories, advertisements, and lyrics from popular songs of the time; "The Camera Eye," incidents from Dos Passos' life, which he narrates in an impressionistic manner; and short non-fictional biographies, often in free verse, of important figures of the era. Altogether there sixty-seven chapters of "Newsreel," fifty-one of "The Camera Eye," and twenty-seven biographies.

These serve as choral accompaniments to the stories of the twelve major fictional characters. Thus Charley Anderson's career in *The Big Money* has as accompaniments biographies of Frederick Winslow Taylor—the industrial

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efficiency expert—, Henry Ford, Thorstein Veblen—author of *The Engineers and the Price System*—and Wilbur and Orville Wright.

U.S.A. is endlessly rich. Our twelve fictional characters live in a complex social medium—exemplified by the biographies and the “Newsreels”—and they, like the author of “The Camera Eye,” are shaping their personal characters and fates every day. Juxtapositions, both within sections (narrative or auxiliary) and from section to section, produce much of the power and meaning of the trilogy.

The trilogy is an extraordinarily energetic work, its energy being due partly to these juxtapositions. But its energy is due at least as much to the language, which is most spectacular in the biographies.

Can one forget the tribute to Senator Robert La Follette for his stand in the U.S. Senate in 1917?

He was one of “the little group of willful men expressing no opinion but their own” who stood out against Woodrow Wilson’s armed ship bill that made war with Germany certain; they called it a filibuster, but it was six men with nerve straining to hold back a crazy steamroller with their bare hands...

In a book review that Dos Passos wrote in college, “Conrad’s *Lord Jim*,” he declared that Conrad’s novels furnish “mental grindstone.” This is certainly true of his own *U.S.A.* As with most great works of fiction, what you

find in the trilogy depends very much on the intellect, background, experience, and imagination you bring to it.

An example of such reader-writer interdependence may be found in Jean-Paul Sartre's essay "John Dos Passos and 1919" (1938), an analysis of Dos Passos' narrative style. It stresses his mechanical rendering of his characters' words and deeds, and links the resultant portrayals to the way in which capitalist society affects the characters' behavior. Sartre closes with the unequivocal statement: "I regard Dos Passos as the greatest writer of our time."

Sometimes the most important fact about a situation or experience—here I am concerned with literary experience—is so pervasive that we overlook it. I think that this is the situation with Dos Passos' *U.S.A.* I have described the twelve major individual characters. But the most important character in the trilogy is not Moorehouse or Mary French or Charley Anderson, etc. Rather it is the one that sticks like Krazy Glue once we think of it as a character—the United States of America. This is true in the same sense that the most important character in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* is not Gulliver, but mankind. As Americans watch the twelve major human characters live out their lives, they may be so accustomed to the country which these characters inhabit that they lose sight of it as a subject.

We begin with the size of the country, almost half a continent. The same kind of novel could not be written about Holland. Mac, the first fictional character we encounter, grows up in Middletown (Connecticut), and

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Chicago. Leaving his uncle in Chicago and setting out to make his own way in life, he travels from Saginaw, Michigan, to Seattle (by way of Winnipeg, Banff, and Vancouver, in Canada), then to Portland, San Francisco, Goldfield (Nevada), San Diego, Los Angeles, Yuma (Arizona) and El Paso, before he crosses into Juarez, in Mexico. In Portland, while hopping a freight train, he misses his footing and becomes separated from Ike Hall, a young I.W.W. member with whom he has been traveling. "That was the last he saw of Ike Hall," Dos Passos writes. It's an immense country.

Everywhere in Mac's wanderings we are on ships or trains or in hotels or construction camps. We encounter railroad brakemen, prostitutes, printers, waitresses, etc., and see how they act and learn what they say. The same is true, in different forms, of the travels of many of the other characters. We have a Whitmanian sweep of the United States.

But where is the freedom Whitman idealized? Obvious vestiges of European feudalism disappeared here at about the time of the American Revolution. The United States is still a relatively free land for white men. But a now-predominating industrial capitalism wishes to erase opposition. Soldiers in Goldfield try to prevent I.W.W. agitators from entering the town during a miners' strike, and Mac pretends to be a book salesman to get in. Ben Compton is horribly beaten by sheriff's deputies in Everett, Washington, when the I.W.W. attempts to hold a meeting there. When the United States enters World War I—for Dos Passos a capitalist war—dissent against the conflict is punished fiercely.

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Non-whites usually fare worse than economic radicals. Dos Passos' United States is a country dominated politically and economically by people of northern European origin. The Sacco-Vanzetti affair, which is important in the Mary French narrative and climactic in the "The Camera Eye" and "Newsreel," is the fullest and most dramatic illustration of ethnic persecution. And where in Dos Passos' *U.S.A.* are blacks and Mexicans? So far down in the nation's social hierarchy that they are noticeable mostly in the remarks of the "whites" (a category that doesn't include Italians and Hispanics).

In an early "Camera Eye" section, Dos Passos' mother tells him of her going to Mexico with the elder Dos Passos in a private railroad car before the boy was born. She was frightened by rifle shots fired from the back of the train. "But it was alright," she says, "turned out to be nothing but a little shooting they'd been only shooting a greaser that was all."

Doc, a heavy-drinking Floridian who converses with Charley Anderson on a boat from New Orleans to New York, says that he wants to get to France in a volunteer ambulance corps before the war goes bellyup. And when they have drunk two quarts of Bacardi—the narrative continues—"Doc was saying he didn't believe in white men shootin' each other up, only niggers, and started going round the boat lookin' for that damn shine steward to kill him just to prove it..."

But the non-radical "white" majority have stresses of their own. In most societies in history, people have performed the same work that their parents and grand-

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parents did, and have had the same social status. A major fact about the United States that Dos Passos depicts is that this need not be so—and often cannot be so—here. Both Moorehouse and Stoddard are from working class families, and both are determined to be business successes. Margo Dowling while in California buys, on payments, an old Rolls Royce displaying a coat of arms on it. Then with her husband acting as uniformed chauffeur, she sets out to impress people.

The point of the final piece in *U.S.A.*, “Vag,” is that the American dream of rising economically has become less and less realizable. While Vag thumbs for a ride on the road, he sees and hears a transcontinental airplane overhead. Dos Passos contrasts the starving Vag with a businessman passenger on the plane, who vomits his steak dinner into a carton.

The airplane in this final piece reminds us also that there is a history of transportation in the trilogy. In an early section of “The Camera Eye” we found Dos Passos traveling with his parents in a horse-drawn cab, and later, in a biography, we encountered Henry Ford mass producing the automobile.

A more general point is that twentieth century America is a country with rapidly changing technologies. When we last glimpse Margo Dowling, there is gossip that she doesn’t have a voice for talking pictures, and that her career is ending. Mac’s uncle Tim, a printer and ironically a socialist, buys a linotype machine; and an old German typesetter working for him says: “Fifty-five years a printer, and now when I’m old I’ll have to carry hods to make a

living." One of Dos Passos' major themes in *U.S.A.* is that most American inventors have known and cared nothing about the social consequences of their inventions.

There is much that we might add about Dos Passos' portrayal of the country. One subject would be the role of women. Typically, women make their way socially and economically through the favor of men; Janey Williams, Eleanor Stoddard, and Margo Dowling offer examples. What could be more significant about Dos Passos' portrayal of public life and power from the 1890s through 1936 than the fact that only one biography of a woman appears in his trilogy?

Still another feature of Dos Passos' United States, like many of the others a continuing feature, is immigration. Uncle Tim's typesetter, Ben Compton's parents, and Sacco and Vanzetti are a few of the immigrants. Millions of people have been entering in every decade—a fact that distinguishes the country, historically and sociologically, from almost any other. The United States which Dos Passos depicts, and which we still know today, is dynamic and ever-changing.

A huge place, three thousand miles across, with over a hundred million ethnically diverse people, seacoasts, lake shores, prairies, cities and villages, linked by railroads and highways—everywhere the particulars of hotels, bungalows, frame houses, restaurants—and everywhere the talk of the people. This ever-changing country is the chief character in the three books, and every human character, every place, every custom, every action, every word is an element in it.

*Richard Ellsworth Savage:
A Character with a
Pronounced Lack of
Character*



*T*he final Richard Ellsworth Savage section (*The Big Money*, pp. 477–519)¹ gives us our last glimpse of the trio of major characters in *U.S.A.*—J. Ward Moorehouse, Eleanor Stoddard, and Savage—who become and remain genuine business “successes” in a capitalist society that John Dos Passos scorned in the 1930s. Moorehouse, with all his fortune, is a lonely man; he married merely for money, and then by his callous behavior helped drive his wife insane. Eleanor has ended her close companionship with him to marry a Russian prince and acquire a title, an empty one, as the Russian aristocracy no longer exists in its homeland. But for Eleanor the marriage will be one more step away from the stinking Chicago stockyards, where her father worked. Neither Moorehouse nor Savage will lift a finger to help Eveline Hutchins, a mutual friend, who is frantically seeking to back the production of a play by an author she hopes to marry. In the next nar-

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rative section, she will commit suicide, after the author abandons her for another woman.

All three successes are without altruism or compassion, though Savage may have glimmerings of them. Unlike Moorehouse and Stoddard, he possesses all the elements for genuine distinction: intelligence, good looks, polite manners, easy sociability, a prestigious private school and Harvard education, literary and linguistic talent—all the elements, that is, except character. It is Dos Passos' unfolding of Savage's lack of character that makes Savage a memorable figure in *U.S.A.* And a significant one too, for Dos Passos, like Walt Whitman in *Democratic Vistas*, saw a widespread lack of character among the American middle class of his time, and blamed it for many public and private evils.²

We follow Savage through a week in New York and Washington, D.C. Now probably in his early thirties, he is earning \$15,000 a year (quite a sum in the 1920s) as one of two chief assistants to the public relations tycoon Moorehouse. He and the other assistant, Ed Griscolm, are competing in working up a campaign to get Moorehouse's firm the lucrative account for E.R. Bingham's patent medicine empire. By the end of the section, Savage has triumphed over Griscolm, Moorehouse has become ill with heart disease, and Savage—now earning \$25,000—is taking charge of the New York office. From a business standpoint, his is an exemplary success story.

But psychologically his life, already wretched, is careening towards disaster. He has become a compulsive drinker, who drinks continually and heavily. His

deportment in the Moorehouse firm is all strategy. On Moorehouse's broaching the topic of self-medication, we read: "Dick twisted his face into a look of lively interest." During the ensuing business conference, "when J.W. smiled Dick smiled too." Off the job, Dick tells Eveline Hutchins: "I've been working for him for years now and I don't know whether he's a genius or a stuffed shirt." But to Reggie Talbot, a young friend working in the firm, he says: "He's the most brilliant figure in the publicrelations field" (*BM*: 479, 480, 487, 482). Then he feels ashamed of the oily note in his voice and shuts up.

When he lets himself go psychologically, the result is disastrous. Towards the end of the section he is dancing cheek to cheek "with a soft-handed brown boy in a tight-fitting suit the color of his skin" in a basement dive in Harlem (*BM*: 516-17). After being brought home by two people from that place, he wakes to find his head bleeding and his money gone, and he worries that he may be blackmailed.

Moorehouse is simple and opportunistic in his view of the world, but Savage is sophisticated and cynical, and hence far more reprehensible if one shares the novelist's values. An English major at Harvard College, Savage is on the staffs of the *Monthly* and the *Advocate*, and he is a pacifist at the start of the war. At almost every turn in his story, he is aware that he is betraying religious, social, or personal values. When as a teen-ager, he engages in an adulterous affair with the wife of an Episcopalian minister who is his friend, he is afraid that he has committed the sin against the Holy Ghost. From Italy he writes the two that

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the war is corrupt and insane, and later in Paris he buys a pocket compass and plans to go across the French border into Spain. Once there he will send out “flaming poems and manifestoes, calling young men to revolt against their butchers” (*NN*: 211). Instead, on the ship back to the United States, he guiltily drops the compass overboard.

Dick through the influences of a family friend and of his family background is helped to a lieutenancy in Ordinance. On the ship going to France the second time he ingratiates himself with a West Point major, and tears up a joking letter, in doggerel, about his good fortune in the Army, dropping the scraps down a toilet. His discarding of the letter and the compass are both symbolic of his surrender of integrity. Soon he is a captain in the Army Post Dispatch Service.

True, he still retains his political views, and tells Anne Elizabeth Trent (“Daughter”) that the people of Europe are being betrayed, and that President Woodrow Wilson’s face is like a reptile’s. But after he hears that many people got sentenced to twenty years in prison for refusing to register for the draft, he tells a former companion in the ambulance service: “Well, that comes of monkeying with the buzzsaw”—echoing a caution that an official in Paris had given Savage when he was expelled from the Red Cross (*NN*: 383).

Savage’s betrayal of Daughter, whom he gets pregnant and then abandons, once again proclaims his lack of integrity. But it is also related to his bisexuality; he clearly does not want an enduring sexual attachment to a woman, though he all the more seeks challenges in heterosexual escapades.

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At the start of Savage's story his mother, the daughter of a deceased general, works in a genteel boarding house owned by her sister. She and her children formerly lived in the Chicago suburb Oak Park and had servants, but then Richard's father was convicted of a crime and sent to Atlanta Penitentiary. The mother never forgives her husband, and probably gives Richard and his elder brother the idea that they must restore her to easy circumstances. Her selfishness and self-pity are a model for Richard's, and her situation a recurrent excuse for his defaults. When a colonel laughingly asks him : "Can you see yourself as a public relations counsel," he answers: "Well, I've got my mother to think of." Later he tells Daughter: "I can't support a child until I have some definite career, and I've got my mother to support" (*NN*: 379, 389). While working for Moorehouse, he lives in a New York apartment on 56th Street with his mother, whom he sends to vacation resorts. Refusing to help Eveline Hutchins with a couple of thousand dollars, he says: "I'm flat broke . . . and Mother has to be supported in the style to which she is accustomed" (*BM*: 485).

What are we to make of his name? First, as to "Richard," Dos Passos might perhaps be playing with the "way to wealth" theme in *Poor Richard's Almanack*. Just as Savage is getting a job with Moorehouse, Eleanor counsels him about Anne Elizabeth: "She's a cute little thing . . . but you oughtn't to marry just yet, of course it's none of my business . . . an unsuitable marriage has been the ruination of many a promising young fellow." Later, while Savage is falling asleep in bed after he has turned Daughter away,

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Dos Passos writes about him thus: "Poor Dick got to go to work after the signing of the peace. Poor Tom's cold. Poor Dickyboy...Richard...He brought his feet up to where he could rub them. Poor Richard's feet" (NN: 393, 397).

As for the name "Ellsworth," Dick is the grandson of a General Ellsworth, who campaigned against the Apache chief Geronimo. And what of the name "Savage"? With Dick's polite background, he would seem to merit a more genteel name. Of course, "savages" was white Americans' common designation for the warriors led by Geronimo. As we evaluate Richard Ellsworth Savage's behavior, we may infer an irony in the name, reminiscent of Thorstein Veblen's in describing much of contemporary "civilized" culture as barbarian.

Dick certainly savages Daughter, as well as Reggie Talbot, whom he allows to be fired without warning after he is irritated by Reggie's irreverent banter about Moorehouse, and Reggie's fiancée's rejecting Savage's drunken advances. And he savages society in a career devoted to such campaigns as defeating pure food and drug legislation. What should not escape notice is that he also savages literature itself and his entire humanistic education by some of his daily remarks. Explaining to his brother why he left a French whorehouse to which he had brought him, he quotes from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, saying: "I haven't got any morals but I'm finnick... Epicurus' owne sonne." And commenting to Eleanor about Daughter's death, he says: "What did you expect me to do, jump into the grave like Hamlet?" (NN: 354, 462).

When he takes a job with Moorehouse's firm, he writes

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his mother from Paris that he will be able “to continue my real work on the side” (NN: 394). He is adept at writing verse, but there is no reason to think that he was ever a poet pursuing truth. While Savage was at Harvard, we read: “He managed to find time to polish up a group of sonnets called *Morituri Te Salutant* that he sent to a prize competition run by *The Literary Digest*. It won the prize but the editors wrote back that they would prefer a note of hope in the last sestet. Dick put in the note of hope and sent the hundred dollars to Mother to go to Atlantic City with” (NN: 96).

When Moorehouse reminisces about his once having wanted to be a songwriter, Dick responds: “Shake hands, J.W., with the ruins of a minor poet” (BM: 492). If he had not met Moorehouse, I imagine, he would have become one of the debonair writers frequenting the dining room of the Algonquin Hotel in New York.

A biography of Randolph Bourne, shortly following the first section on Savage, provides a stark contrast to him. An impoverished hunchback who was constantly in physical pain, Bourne worked his way through Columbia University. By the spring of 1917, he had gained recognition as a social critic and author setting forth progressive reforms. But he wrecked his career by opposing the war, and died virtually silenced, leaving his uncompromising writings and his example of integrity as legacies.

Arresting as the portrait of Savage is, we note that it is but a small part of the overall subject of Dos Passos’ trilogy—the United States of America. In another essay I have called this overall, dominant subject of his trilogy

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"the thirteenth character," contrasting it with the twelve major fictional characters. We must at some point shift our focus and ask how Savage is shaped by the society of which he is a part and the milieu in which he advances his career; and, in view of the many similarities between U.S. pecuniary culture of the 1920s and of our own time, we might well see the query as germane in our lives. But this is matter for another, and longer, essay.

Notes

1. All citations are from John Dos Passos, *U.S.A.* New York: The Modern Library, 1937. *NN* will refer to *Nineteen-Nineteen* and *BM* to *The Big Money*.

2. See Melvin Landsberg, *Dos Passos' Path to "U.S.A."* (Boulder: Colorado Associated University Press, 1972), pp. 226, 256 n. 82.

Two Studies on Mary French



1. "Friends and Acquaintances of Novelists": Was There a "Model" for Mary French?

*T*hirty-three years ago I sent John Dos Passos a list of questions. One was: "Did any of the women you knew in the twenties or thirties strongly suggest the career or character of Mary French in *U.S.A.*?" Dos Passos answered: "Of course. Mary Heaton Vorse, who recently died, was one of them. Never forget however that the friends and acquaintances of novelists are merely the seed from which their invented characters grow."¹

Of the twelve major characters in the trilogy, French is probably the most sympathetic to readers sharing Dos Passos' outrage over workers' sufferings and violent repressions of strikes. Alfred Kazin called French "the only fictional character in *The Big Money* who gets our respect."² So it not surprising that my curiosity about Dos Passos' originals has been shared by others.

Donald Pizer in his study *Dos Passos' "U.S.A."* (1988) writes: "There is no known source for the portrait of Mary

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French.”³ Dee Garrison in a book published a year later, *Mary Heaton Vorse: The Life of an American Insurgent*, states: “Scholars who have discussed the work of Dos Passos have not recognized that he used Mary Vorse as the model for his portrayal of Mary French.” Again, in a note, Ms. Garrison says that she is the first to show that Vorse was “the model for Mary French.”⁴

But Garrison also says that Dos Passos “presents a fundamentally nineteenth-century Victorian view of women”—portraying French “without glamour or toughness, quirkishly devoted to ideals, asking no questions, and making no struggle against her fate.”⁵ I think that in offering this comment (whatever its validity), she is implying that French differs considerably from the historical Vorse. What then does she mean by “model”? In this study I shall recount enough of Vorse’s life to allow me to compare it with the Mary French story in *The Big Money*.

Mary Heaton Vorse (1874-1966) was a neighbor and friend of John Dos Passos in Provincetown, Massachusetts.⁶ Ellen, her mother, who was of old New England stock, had married a very rich merchant and sea captain when she was eighteen and borne him five children before his death, when she was thirty-seven. Two years after he died she married Hiram Heaton, an innkeeper’s son of Anglo-Canadian ancestry, who was seven years her junior. Twenty-two months after the second marriage Mary Heaton was born at the family house, on East 40th Street in New York City. When she was five, her parents bought a twenty-four room house in Amherst, Massachusetts, but they did not confine their life to Amherst. Until Mary

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Heaton was ten, they spent their winters in New York; afterwards they were more often in California, Vienna, or Paris in the winter. Before Mary Heaton was fifteen, she learned to speak and write French, German, and Italian. Although she attended two private schools, and high school in Amherst briefly, she got most of her education through private tutoring, travel, and attendance at art galleries, concert halls and opera houses.⁷

During Mary Heaton's childhood, her mother devoted her life to getting the children from her first marriage well launched in life; she sought economic opportunities for the boys and good marriages for the girls. Though the mother was a rebel in small ways (e.g., disdaining fashion in clothing), she opposed women suffrage, believing that women should confine themselves to domestic life. Vorse wrote much later: "My mother's life was tragedy. She had a fine mind and great executive ability, and all this dynamo was idle."⁸

Mary Heaton was closer to her father, who—while enjoying a life of leisure—interested himself in geography and history. By the time she reached her teens, her favorite pastime was reading, and at sixteen she published some light fiction in the *Springfield Journal*. "But Mary [Heaton] found no certain goal" says Garrison. "She longed to escape both her mother's vacuous life and Amherst's decorum."⁹

Her mother dominated the family. At nineteen Mary Heaton persuaded her parents to allow her to study in a Parisian art school, but her mother went with her to Paris. After the young woman's return, her parents ignored her desire to work, her mother wanting her to have a conven-

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tional life of domesticity, and her father counseling her to obey her mother. When Mary Heaton was twenty-two her parents enrolled her in an art school in New York City, but only after she made it clear that if they refused, she would go anyway. For this her mother never forgave her.

Mary Heaton started studies at the Art Students' League in 1896. Two years later she married Albert Vorse, a Harvard-educated newspaperman with literary aspirations. First they wed secretly in New York, and later publicly and formally in Amherst. Then they moved into a Greenwich Village apartment. At about the time that Mary Heaton Vorse gave birth to a son, in December 1901, her husband started to be unfaithful.

As Albert did not do well at writing, they moved to France, where they could live cheaply while he developed as an author. In Europe, the two separated for a while, she going to Fiesole, but later they reunited. Mary Heaton Vorse had given up painting, deciding that she lacked talent. But she had begun to write stories and articles to help support the family, and she met with increasing success while Albert had further disappointments and finally gave up his literary ambition. He continued to be unfaithful, and by 1905 the marriage was close to an end.

In the summer of 1905 they rented a house in Provincetown, Massachusetts, and in 1907 Mary Heaton Vorse purchased one there, and it became her base for the rest of her life. For the winter of 1907-08 Mary Heaton and Albert went to New York and lived in a cooperative house in Greenwich Village. There her contacts with other residents began to turn her towards leftist political reform.

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Summers in Provincetown and winters in New York became part of her pattern for many years. In 1907 she had a daughter, but because of Albert's continuing infidelity, she separated from him in 1909, and that summer lived in Provincetown with a young male cousin of his. In 1910 Albert died, as did Mary Heaton Vorse's mother.

Her mother left her no money, in reproof of her way of life, and left only one thousand dollars a year to Mary Heaton Vorse's father, who was growing senile. He lived with Vorse for a year, in Provincetown and New York, and then went into a hospital, where he died three years later.

Vorse had supported her family by writing since 1906, her fiction exploring the problems of middle class wives finding ready interest. She published in well-paying women's magazines such as *Good Housekeeping* and *Women's Home Companion*, and in general magazines like the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's*, *Scribner's*, and *McClure's*.

Living in a Greenwich Village apartment in the winter of 1910, she became a district leader in Mrs. Florence Jaffray Harriman's New York Milk Committee, and wrote of poor children dying from contaminated milk in the city. In 1911 she witnessed the Triangle Fire, in Greenwich Village; one hundred and forty-six workers perished because the Triangle Shirtwaist Company refused to allow safe conditions. The next year, when police interfered with workers' sending their children to safety with friends and relatives during the I.W.W.-led textile strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts, she got *Harper's Weekly* to send her to Lawrence to write an article on the situation. She went

6 *The Permanence of John Los Passos*

there with Joe O'Brien, a socialist and free-lance reporter whom she had met the year before, and in Lawrence talked to the I.W.W. organizers William Haywood and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn. On Vorse's and O'Brien's return from the strike, they decided that they wanted to tell the workers' story—and also to marry, which they did in 1912.

Vorse and O'Brien spent three happy years together, and in February 1914 had a son. They lived in Greenwich Village and in Provincetown. Vorse had been one of the founders and owners of *Masses* in 1911. When after its bankruptcy in 1912, Max Eastman became editor, she remained on the staff, and in the magazine's first issue under Eastman, attacked the Goddess of Domesticity. In *Mass'* later years, before the Federal Government shut it down in 1917, most staff meetings were held in her house. She was one of the founders of the feminist Heterodoxy Club, in the Village in 1912. Vorse and O'Brien were original members of the social, political-reformist, and artistic Liberal Club, begun in 1913. Partly because of Vorse's presence, Provincetown became a summer retreat for many Greenwich Village intellectuals, and she was one of the small group that started the Provincetown Players.

Vorse and O'Brien went to Europe in 1913, she having an assignment from a women's magazine to write a series of articles on the Montessori method of education, under development in Italy. They went on to Budapest, where she was deeply affected by a convention of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance, on which she was reporting. After her return from Europe, she started a Montessori school in Provincetown, did much writing, and enjoyed

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sailing. She and Joe were also drinking heavily by the summer of 1913.

American cities faced economic hard times during the unusually cold winter of 1913-14, and the two were active with I.W.W.-led protests against unemployment and police repression in New York. Such protesting, writing to support the family, and nursing her baby boy, born in February 1914, were too much for Vorse. She, and Joe too, fell ill late in the spring. In the fall Joe, who had been hospitalized but seemed much better, urged her to take an opportunity to report on the European war for *Good Housekeeping* and *McClure's*.

She was in Europe for six weeks, first going to Holland, to an international peace congress presided over by Jane Addams. Vorse was a delegate of the Women's Suffrage Party of New York City. Afterwards she was in Germany and Switzerland briefly, and then went on to witness wartime misery in Paris and northern France. On her return, O'Brien met her at the boat, and they went to Provincetown.

In October 1915 O'Brien died of stomach cancer, in a New York hospital. Overcome with grief, Vorse took to bed in the city for weeks. Now she had to support herself, her children, and their nurse, through her writings—but she found herself unable to write effectively. Nevertheless, while in New York she worked in the publicity committee of the state women suffrage movement, and also worked to get media support for Margaret Sanger, then under indictment for distributing birth control information.

Late in the spring of 1916, Vorse and her children returned to Provincetown. Now it was crowded with writ-

8 *The Permanence of John Los Passos*

ers, many of whom probably would have been in Europe in peacetime. Lonely and with less and less money in the bank, she took refuge in alcohol, dance, music, and frequent lovers.

Then letters from her friends Bill Haywood and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn arrived, asking her to come to Minnesota to report on the Mesabi Range strike, which had been sparked by a reduction in the wages of iron-ore miners. Flynn's letter was decisive for Vorse. Carlo Tresca and ten others were in jail, Flynn wrote, charged with first degree murder—the officials claimed that their speeches had incited violence. Early in August, Vorse left her children with Albert's mother, obtained magazine and newspaper assignments, and went to Minnesota. There she witnessed violent repression of the strikers and for the first time actually participated in a strike, mounting a platform and addressing workers.

Vorse had become obsessed with a desire to get away from her children, to interact with the greater world, and to think and write about her experiences. In 1918 the Red Cross telegraphed three times asking her to do publicity work for them in Europe, and *McCall's* and *Harper's* gave her assignments there. Leaving the two younger children with their nurse (the eldest, now seventeen, was away at school), she sailed for Europe one day after the armistice. For the next four years she would live with the younger children during summers only.

In England she reported on the Labour Party's campaign in the general election, and even addressed envelopes for one of the women candidates, a notable union

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organizer. In France she heard President Woodrow Wilson speak to American troops and viewed devastation in the war zone. With her military pass and Red Cross assignments, she went on to see and write about Germany and northern Italy. Then from Italy she made a trip to Switzerland, to report on the International Socialist Conference in Bern. When she got back to Italy, the Balkan Commission of the Red Cross offered her a job reporting on relief activity there. On returning from the Balkans to Paris, she learned that the prompt transportation back to the United States which the Red Cross had promised her was not to be had.

While she was awaiting transportation in Paris, she met Robert Minor, a thirty-five-year-old Texan, who had become an anarchist in France some years before. He sacrificed a lucrative job as a cartoonist for the *New York Evening World* because he would not support its stand on the war, and joined the *Masses'* staff in 1915. A year later he went to San Francisco to organize the defense of Tom Mooney, a labor leader charged with planting a bomb at a San Francisco Preparedness Day parade, and sentenced to death. In March 1918 he went to Russia, wishing to see the revolution there, and in early 1919 he went to Germany to see the Spartacist rebellion against a majority socialist government. And he seems to have participated in that rebellion.

Vorse and Minor became lovers almost immediately. While they were waiting to return home, the American Relief Administration, directed by Herbert Hoover, asked her to describe for American women's magazines how the

10 *The Permanence of Jofin Dos Passos*

ending of the wartime food blockade affected Austrian women and children. She left for Vienna on June 3, after being assured of transportation home for her and Minor. In Vienna the A.R.A. director asked her to go to on Budapest, deliver a message to the fallen prime minister, Count Mihály Károlyi, and to observe the workings of Béla Kun's Communist government. Though she disliked what she saw of Kun's authoritarian regime and its censorship, she was more concerned with the U.S. government's using food against Communism there, and Hoover's secret urging that French troops, then in Yugoslavia, intervene against Kun. When she finally sailed from Paris to New York on June 19, she went alone. Robert Minor had been arrested for disseminating Bolshevik propaganda among U.S. troops in Germany, and was charged with treason. However, he was freed on July 8.

Vorse delighted in her release from domesticity, Garrison reminds us more than once. Leaving her two younger children in Virginia with Joe O'Brien's sister, she went to Pittsburgh in September 1919 to report on the start of what would become the Great Steel Strike of 1919, planning to return in several weeks and be in New York with the children during the winter. But she stayed till the end, traveling in several states to get information for her news stories, which were published in the steel strike bulletin and in liberal newspapers and journals. After the strike failed, she was afraid to stay in New York lest she be arrested in Federal Government raids against "reds," and got a job as an organizer in Pennsylvania for the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America. Afterwards

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she worked for a year in New York, doing publicity work for the Amalgamated and writing for its newspaper. To supplement her very low pay from the union, she wrote fiction for women's magazines and articles for magazines like *Harper's*. When the Federated Press—a non-profit syndicate presenting news from a labor point of view—was formed she took a job writing for it.

Besides publishing two volumes of fiction in 1920, Vorse finished *Men and Steel*, an account of the steel strike (her ninth book). In May of that year Sacco and Vanzetti were arrested and charged with murder. Minor and Flynn produced the initial defense pamphlet. When Tresca and Flynn asked Vorse to help publicize the case that year, she traveled with Flynn to the Dedham, Massachusetts, jail to interview Sacco, met with his wife too, and wrote about the interviews in socialist journals. Vorse also interested the American Civil Liberties Union in the defense.

Minor by 1921 was a follower of the Russian Communist Party line. When he wrote asking Vorse to come to Moscow, where he was an American delegate to the Third Congress of the Comintern, she went, looking forward to observing the Soviet Union and reporting on the famine there. She remained in the U.S.S.R. for six months, until early in 1922, visiting the famine area, sending reports to American newspapers, and twice speaking with Lenin. Vorse and Minor were married in the U.S.S.R., and when they returned, lived together for a while in New York. In April 1922, she found herself pregnant, and in the early summer moved with her children to a resort town, Highlands, New Jersey. There while walking down a flight of

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wooden stairs leading from her apartment to the beach, she stumbled, had a long fall, and miscarried.

Less than a week later, while she was still bedridden, Robert Minor came by accompanied by an old leftist flame to tell her that the two loved one another and were going to be married. (The Soviet marriage was, for some reason, not valid in the U.S.A.) Vorse's elder son, who was now 21, looked after her until she was able to go to Provincetown.

Besides losing her baby and her husband, Vorse had become addicted to morphine, as a result of her physician's treatment after her accident. She remained addicted through 1923 and 1924, then broke the habit, though she succumbed to it again briefly in 1928, when she was having serious problems with her daughter. Vorse took no more lovers after Minor. For most of the decade, says Garrison, she was obsessed with a single thought—that she had failed as a mother, and for years she tried to make it up to her daughter. As before, she had a family to support. She won O'Henry prizes for her popular short stories, but when she wrote truly realistic fiction, the editors of the general and women's magazines rejected them.

Vorse became publicity director for the Passaic textile workers strike in 1926—a strike in which Dos Passos interested himself, journeying to Passaic with a group of intellectuals. Then, in April 1929, she went to Gastonia, North Carolina, to report on the strike of textile workers there and elsewhere in the South. "As always," says Garrison, "Vorse's primary focus was on the women." Vorse left before a mob destroyed a workers' tent colony,

following violence between workers and the Gastonia police. (In Provincetown Dos Passos brought her news of the destruction.) She returned to North Carolina to report on the trial of textile strike leaders for conspiracy leading to murder.¹⁰ Following the judge's declaring a mistrial, mobs destroyed union headquarters and killed Ella May Wiggins, a white striker and ballad singer, who tried to organize black workers. After three weeks of reporting nearly continuous terror, Vorse went on to Marion, North Carolina, where factory deputies had killed six strikers.

During the early 1930s, says Garrison, Vorse continued to work with Communist labor organizers she admired, but had little sympathy with Communist leaders. As she could not live harmoniously with her daughter in her Provincetown house, she went to Mexico to write, and there finished *Strike* (1930), a novel about events in Gastonia. The success of *Strike* led the Communist Party to try to use her in party-led cultural programs. But she resisted close ties to the party, one reason being that she was repelled by events in the U.S.S.R., above all the treatment of the kulaks.

In September 1931 friends invited her to join a writers' committee headed by Theodore Dreiser to go to Kentucky and publicize how union coal miners were being denied civil liberties. Dos Passos was among the writers on the committee. Vorse agreed, but while at a party with Dos Passos in Provincetown, decided instead to report on Great Britain. Upon her return Vorse's friends asked her to join a second writers' group—including Edmund Wilson, Waldo Frank, and Malcolm Cowley—to convey food to coal min-

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ers and again test civil liberties in Harlan County. Fearing that Communists would provoke violence in Kentucky and finding that the writers didn't perceive the dangers there, she hesitated. But wishing to help the starving miners and their families, she finally decided to go. Dos Passos visited her at her house on three successive nights to help her make up her mind. In Tennessee the committee discovered that a nineteen-year-old National Miners Union organizer who that day had left Pineville, Kentucky, to meet the food truck, had been killed by sheriffs. In Pineville, armed men, some with machine guns, were everywhere. Deputies took the male writers on the committee for a ride to the state border and bloodied up Waldo Frank and Allen Taub, an attorney for the International Labor Defense.

We have carried Vorse's biography through February 1932, near the time when Dos Passos in *The Big Money* concludes the Mary French narrative. At this point French is in New York working with a Communist-led relief committee to raise funds and send trucks to striking coal miners in Pennsylvania.

Vorse and French are both leftist labor journalists, but we need to note that French is sixteen years younger. She is first drawn into labor publicity in Pittsburgh during the Great Steel Strike of 1919. Later, in New York, she writes a labor article for the *Freeman*, gets a research job with the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union, and is active in labor defense. When Ben Compton, the young Communist Party organizer who has become her lover, leads the Passaic Textile Workers strike in 1926, she toils

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devotedly and without pay at publicity and fund-raising for it. She and Ben quarrel after the strike is lost, and she goes to Boston to work with a committee to save Sacco and Vanzetti.

Outside a jail house where French and some pickets have been held, she meets Donald Stevens, a Communist Party leader who like them has been released on bail. French assists Stevens in his final, desperate attempt to organize strikes against the executions. Afterwards they become lovers, live together in New York, and are involved with the committee helping the striking Pennsylvania coal miners. One day Stevens suddenly says that he must go abroad on essential Communist Party business, and refuses to take French. When he returns to New York, he gives her a quick brush-off at the pier. A day later she learns from someone else that Stevens married an English comrade in Moscow.

Despite the resemblances, French is largely a creation of Dos Passos' imagination, I believe, not a character modeled closely on Vorse. She is a leftist reporter and publicist who participates in historical events like, or identical to, some that Vorse did, though Vorse was a more experienced journalist and a more effective participant. Besides her journalism, Vorse wrote fiction—French merely projects a novel about Boston, and she plans to write it after the Sacco-Vanzetti case has been won. Like Vorse, French is not a Communist Party member, but—again like Vorse—she will work closely with Communist labor organizers. Like Vorse in 1922, French around 1930 is abandoned by

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a lover who is a Communist functionary, and we should add that French, like Vorse, is a plain-looking, native-born white woman with a bookish past.

However, for Dos Passos in *U.S.A.* it would have been an anomaly to develop a major character without reference to her parents. French's identification with her father, a poor man's doctor among Colorado miners, who drives himself to exhaustion for his patients, votes for Debs, and dies a martyr fighting the influenza epidemic of 1918, turns her to self-sacrifice for the impoverished and oppressed. Her mother's continual denunciations of her father's choices as a physician lead French to hate her and her values. We do not know what Dos Passos knew about Vorse's parents. But for Dr. French's decisive influence on his daughter's social sympathies, Dos Passos would have found no precedent in Vorse's life.

If parental influences can be immense in a character's development, the era in which a character reaches early maturity can leave a predominant impression. Goethe noted this when he wrote in the preface to his autobiography: "Anyone born only ten years earlier or later might have become, as regards his education and his effect on others, a totally different person." Vorse belonged to the generation that initiated pre-World War I left radicalism in Greenwich Village. She became strongly pro-labor during the heady days when progressivism was a powerful, growing political current in the nation, when the Socialist Party drew increasing numbers of voters nationally, and when a strike like the 1913 one in Lawrence, Massachusetts, could gather national support.

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For French, whose early political-economic experiences come after World War I, the atmosphere is different. Wartime repression, arrests, and heavy jail sentences destroyed the I.W.W. The Socialist Party split over support for the war, and its best-known leader, Debs, was sentenced to ten years in prison. An aggressive Communist movement, new in the American scene, prompted labor's opponents to declare that strikes are foreign-led and treasonable. Vorse's career as a labor reporter and publicist began with the I.W.W.'s victorious strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts. French's career begins with the disastrous Great Steel Strike of 1919.

The pre- and post-war eras, then, provided different initiations for Vorse and French, and their parental influences are different. So also are certain important personal circumstances. Vorse in her childhood and youth lived and traveled in Europe; her familiarity with the continent and ability with French, German, and Italian opened the way for her career as a reporter on European events. Mary French totally lacks this area of experience. From Vorse's Greenwich Village years, she was a suffragist and feminist. French has no feminist purpose as such, though in high school she wants to be like Helen Hunt Jackson and at college she thinks of Jane Addams as a role model.

Formal marriage and children, elements in Vorse's life about which Dos Passos certainly knew, are absent in French's story. Vorse's psychological and practical problems in being a mother of three and yet pursuing a public career give her a far different identity.

One event in French's life, her abortion at Ben Compton's urging, when he is about to organize strikes in the

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Passaic area, may be based on the experience of a second historical figure. Compton's role in the strikes resembles that of the Communist labor organizer Albert Weisbord, who was living with his Communist companion Vera Buch. When Weisbord proposed their union, during the Passaic strike, he clearly said that they should have no children, and she tacitly agreed. Afterwards, Buch became pregnant, and hesitated, as she wanted a child; but Weisbord was insistent. Vorse and Buch roomed together and became friends during the Gastonia strike, while Buch was still suffering psychological, and perhaps physical, pain from of her operation. We cannot say that Dos Passos heard about the abortion from Vorse, but it is conceivable that she told him or a mutual friend. Like French, Buch was in Boston during the final appeal for Sacco and Vanzetti; with co-workers she went door to door giving out bills and talking to people.¹¹

There were likely other people whose stories Dos Passos drew upon. But biographical sources were not all that prompted his creative imagination. We note that French lives a far narrower life than Vorse. Besides lacking her rich European background, French has no circle of stimulating friends, no thoughts for painting and sculpture, and never goes sailing, or even row-boating in New York's Central Park. She has become obsessed with the class struggle—and large parts of the explanation are the example of her father's selflessness in Colorado and her experiences later in an era of defeat for organized labor.

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Notes

1. Letter from John Dos Passos, July 12, 1966.
2. Alfred Kazin, Introduction to John Dos Passos, *The 42nd Parallel* (New York: Signet Classics, New American Library, 1969), xvii.
3. Donald Pizer, *Dos Passos' "U.S.A."* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1988), 164.
4. Dee Garrison, *Mary Heaton Vorse: The Life of an American Insurgent* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 159, 368-69 n. 24.
5. *Ibid.*, 186.
6. In telling about Vorse's life, I rely entirely, except for the material documented in footnotes 7 and 10 below, on Garrison's biography, following her book chronologically and closely paraphrasing her presentations of important matters.
7. On her attendance at art galleries, concert halls, and opera houses, see Mary Heaton Vorse, *A Footnote to Folly* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1935), 26-27.
8. Garrison, *Mary Heaton Vorse*, 7.
9. *Ibid.*, 13.
10. On Dos Passos' journey to Passaic, see Melvin Landsberg, *Dos Passos' Path to "U.S.A."* (Boulder: Colorado Associated University Press, 1972). For the quotation by Garrison, see her *Mary Heaton Vorse*, 222. Edmund Wilson, who was on the *New Republic's* editorial staff when the mob destroyed the workers' tent colony, later wrote: "John Dos Passos and Mary Heaton Vorse both asked the *New Republic* to send them to report on Gastonia, but both were thought to be too far to the Left to be reliable from our point of view." Edmund Wilson, *The Shores of Light* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1952), 497-98.
11. On Compton's resemblances to Weisbord, see Landsberg, *Dos Passos' Path to "U.S.A."*, 131. On Buch's activity for Sacco and Vanzetti and on her abortion, see Vera Buch Weisbord, *A Radical Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 145, 165-69.

2. *Ada Cohn:*
A Secondary Character in U.S.A.

Criticism of *U.S.A.* has done little with the secondary, minor, and "bit" fictional characters present in sections devoted to the twelve major ones. More than twenty-five such characters appear in the Mary French episodes, as do three additional major characters, and we could examine the roles of many of these lesser one with profit. Thus Ada Cohn, Mary's friend from high school, helps us understand both Mary and the general society.

Ada is Jewish, the daughter of a prominent Chicago attorney, whose failing health forced him to move to Colorado Springs. Mary's mother does everything she can to prevent her from going to the Cohns' house, where Ada's parents often invite their daughter's friends to stay for dinner, and Mary does not dare to bring her friend home; however, Mary's father, who refuses to participate in his wife's social climbing, supports her friendship with Ada. We need hardly point out that we are getting commentary on the social position of Jews in Colorado Springs.

At Vassar College, Mary is popular during her first year. But in the second, when Mary's friend arrives, Ada lacks the prevalent restrained style and manner, and Mary is "horrified to catch herself wishing Ada hadn't come." Dos Passos' words, which allow a glimpse of Mary's conscience before she becomes political, again point to Ada's usefulness in the Mary French narrative. The two young women room together, and Vassar students who are socially successful shy away from Mary. As Mary's allowance is minuscule, Ada buys her most of her clothes and

books. When Mary is a junior an anonymous person sends her a newspaper clipping, with marks in red pencil, about her mother's Reno divorce on grounds of Dr. French's intemperance and mental cruelty. Upon reading it, Mary has a long cry and when Ada asks her why her eyes are red, says that she cries when she reads "about those poor soldiers being killed in the war in Europe." Ada is an appropriate recipient of this fib, as she has fragile nerves, and might herself cry over the soldiers. Dos Passos, in another display of Mary's conscience, adds: "It made her feel awful having told Ada a lie and she lay awake all night worrying about it."¹

Both Mary and Ada major in sociology and say they are going to be social workers, and both go to Hull House the next summer to do settlement work. But Ada finds the poverty and squalor she encounters too hard to endure, and she leaves. Back at Vassar in the fall, Ada takes courses in music, studies the violin, and will not talk to Mary about the war, pacifism, or social work.

After Mary does publicity work in the Great Steel Strike of 1919, she takes a job as secretary to George Barrow, a self-serving, conservative labor figure, who claims to be able to help the steel workers, and she becomes pregnant with his child. But when she concludes that he is a "labor faker," she goes to New York to stay with Ada and get an abortion.

Although Ada is deeply agitated by her friend's decision, she lends Mary the necessary money and looks after her for a week after the abortion. When Ada goes to Michigan with her family, she lets Mary stay in her

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apartment for the summer. Of the relationship of the two women at this point, Dos Passos writes:

Mary was relieved to have her gone; she was still fond of her but their interests were so different and they had silly arguments about the relative importance of art and social justice that left them tired and cross at each other so that sometimes they wouldn't speak for several days; and then they hated each other's friends. Still Mary couldn't help being fond of Ada. They were such old friends and Ada forked out so generously for the strikers' defense committees, legalaid funds and everything that Mary suggested; she was a very openhanded girl, but her point of view was hopelessly rich.. she had no social consciousness.²

It is clear that Mary, from her vantage of ideological righteousness, is using Ada. The term "forked out" in Mary's stream of consciousness is not in her favor.

When Ben Compton is released from prison (having been sent there for opposing the "capitalist war") and fears being followed by U.S. government agents, Mary brings him to Ada's apartment, seemingly without asking her permission. Her values have changed since she stayed up all night worrying about having told Ada a fib, and her interactions with Ada allow Dos Passos to show that change.

While Mary is living with Donald Stevens and working with the miners' union, she never sees Ada. However, after Mary walks out on her mother during a lunch at the Plaza Hotel, she is so upset that she has to talk to someone, and she calls Ada. Her friend is sobbing, and asks Mary to come over. She has just broken up with a male friend, and Mary stays with her all afternoon. She also leaves with a hundred dollar check from Ada for the miners' milk fund.

Ada makes her promise to come to one of her concerts the next week. But when Stevens abandons Mary, she stays home instead. Ada, worried, comes over and finds Mary in so bad a state that she brings her to her apartment for a week. After Mary recovers, Ada induces her to go to one of Eveline Johnson's cocktail parties, which George Barrow attends and where the motion picture star Margo Dowling makes an appearance. So in part through Ada Cohn, Dos Passos brings together three major characters—each with her own path and destiny—and allows us to view Eveline and Margo through Mary's eyes..

At the office of the miners' relief committee the next morning, Mary hears that one of the truck drivers, a young friend of hers, has been shot and killed. Then the telephone rings, and Ada tells Mary that Eveline is dead, possibly from suicide. She is too upset to stay alone, Ada says. Won't Mary come over. The Communist Party has called, asking Mary to organize a protest meeting, however, and Mary tells Ada that she can't come. "Say, Rudy," she tells one of her associates at the relief office, "if Ada Cohn calls up again tell her I'm out of the office. . . . I have too much to do to spend my time taking care of hysterical women a day like this."³

As Ada twice spent time and emotion taking care of Mary when she was in distress, Mary's remark is at best unseemly. Ada's loyalties are personal, not political, and she is badly shaken by Eveline's death. Dos Passos' contrast of the embattled leftist Mary with the aesthete Ada is not in Mary's favor. But given Dos Passos' political and economic values in *The Big Money*, neither is it in Ada's.

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Pondering the relationship between the two women, we realize how Ada's presence adds psychological and ethical depth to *U.S.A.*

Notes

1. John Dos Passos, *U.S.A.: The Big Money* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1937), 114.
2. *Ibid.*, 439-40.
3. *Ibid.*, 558.

Homosexuality and Black-White Relations in U.S.A.



n late nineteenth and early twentieth century America according to a new book, passing the black-white color line was sometimes identified, by the person or literary character involved, with passing the heterosexual-homosexual line.¹ In developing this argument, in *Queering the Color Line*, Siobhan B. Somerville discusses the works, and sometimes the lives, of James Weldon Johnson, Jean Toomer, and Carl Van Vechten, among others.

Citing a number of historians, Ms. Somerville writes that “during the 1920s, two neighborhoods in Manhattan—Greenwich Village and Harlem—developed flourishing enclaves of gay culture.” She also calls attention to Henry Lewis Gates Jr.’s assertion that the Harlem Renaissance “was surely as gay as it was black, not that it was exclusively either of these.”

When I received an advertisement of this book, I thought immediately of the final Richard Ellsworth Savage narrative episode in John Dos Passos’ *The Big Money*. There Savage is in a Harlem dive dancing cheek to cheek “with a soft-handed brown boy in a tight-fitting suit the color of his skin” (*BM*, 516).² I sent for a review copy of Ms.

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Somerville's book, advising Duke University Press that I would discuss it only in connection with an episode in Dos Passos' *U.S.A.*

On the surface, Savage and his date, a young socialite girlfriend named Pat Doolittle, are only slumming in Harlem. While he dances with the brown boy, she dances with "a pale pretty mulatto girl." Dick suddenly breaks away from the boy and pulls Pat away from the girl. He forcibly brings Pat back to her home, on Park Avenue, telling her that they left because it was "time to draw the line" (*BM*, 516). But then he returns alone to the very same place in Harlem, and dances with the boy. Now thoroughly drunk and where no one knows him, Savage finds release from his inhibitions.

Why in Harlem, besides for anonymity? Conceivably Dos Passos was basing the event on an incident about which he knew. But *U.S.A.* purposefully depicts much of the country, and the author may well have intended to present a small aspect of Harlem, though certainly not its literary Renaissance.

Homosexuality and black-white relations are two unsettling themes in *U.S.A.*—unsettling to Dos Passos himself in "The Camera Eye" and to characters in his narrative. These themes also find a place in the biographies and the Newsreel. In the concluding Savage episode, towards the end of the trilogy, the two themes seem to reach a finale together.

In "The Camera Eye" (2) of *The 42nd Parallel*, Dos Passos' father (a Northerner) teases the boy's mother (a

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Southerner): "What would you do Lucy if I were to invite one of them to my table? They're very lovely people Lucy the colored people" (*FSP*, 13). The boy's sexual desires do not respect a color line. Later, in "The Camera Eye" (19) "he wished [he] had the nerve to hug and kiss Martha the colored girl they said was half Indian old Emma's daughter" (*FSP*, 239).

Dos Passos does not depict his desires as extending to homoeroticism. This theme appears in "The Camera Eye" (24) of *The 42nd Parallel*. On a steamboat excursion, a "baritone" from Athens, Kentucky, "is too attentive to the small boy," warning him against bad girls, and talking of "beautiful statues of Greek boys." But the child finally gets away from him (*FSP*, 284-85).

The themes of homoeroticism and color appear briefly, but separately, in the biographies. Rudolph Valentino is heartbroken when the *Chicago Tribune* calls him a pink powderpuff (*BM*, 191). And the people choosing a corpse to be the American Unknown Soldier of World War I are told: "Make sure he aint a dinge, boys" (*NN*, 468). The dinge remark is doubly ironic in the light of a Newsreel item which appeared previously: when towards the end of *The 42nd Parallel*, the United States entered World War I, Newsreel XIX proclaimed: "PLAN LEGISLATION TO KEEP COLORED PEOPLE FROM WHITE AREAS" (*FSP*, 362).

In the narratives, Dos Passos presents the two themes extensively. The first Janey Williams section in *The 42nd Parallel* finds the Williamses living in Georgetown, D.C., a deteriorated area. Young Janey walks from school

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with a "little yaller girl" who lives across the street from her. Once after she invites the girl into her house, Janey receives a lecture from her mother: "You must never associate with colored people on an equal basis. Living in this neighborhood it's all the more important to be careful about those things." Joe, her brother, who has already learned this lesson, yells: "Niggerlover niggerlover" in her ear (*FSP*, 135). Ironically, this prejudice, inculcated early, leads to Joe's death in the fourth narrative section on him in *Nineteen-Nineteen*. Armistice Day finds him a merchant seaman in Saint-Nazaire, in France. When he enters a cabaret and sees a prostitute or loose woman he likes dancing with a black Senegalese officer, he attacks the black, and a fracas ensues. Somebody brings a bottle down on Joe's head and crushes his skull.

Earlier, in the second narrative section on Joe Williams in the same volume, a wealthy white American lured Joe into a Trinidad hotel and propositioned him for homosexual favors. Joe pushed the man away and escaped, but his reaction was not the kind of visceral fury he would feel at finding a black dancing with a white woman he wants. Dos Passos ascribes such violent behavior on race to white southern males. Doc, the Floridian who sails from New Orleans to New York with Charley Anderson in the Anderson narrative section of *The 42nd Parallel* exhibits the same visceral fury towards blacks as does Joe. Twice after imbibing liquor he raves about wanting to kill them.

The Margo Dowling narrative sections, all in *The Big Money*, bring the color and homoerotic themes together. Margo at age sixteen, wishing to escape her wretched

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circumstances in New York City, entices Tony Garrido, a twenty-one year old Cuban guitar player, to marry her and take her to his country. She is of Irish descent and blond, and observes that Tony's face is "a very light coffeecolor." In Cuba Margo finds his family "yellow or coffeecolored" (she notes a "niggerwoman" among them) and Tony turns out to be a homosexual, weak both in body and character (*BM*, 243). Margo escapes from Cuba, but Tony remains an unwanted part of her life, continually demanding money, living with male lovers, and interfering with her fortunes. Finally a German homosexual lover murders him.

Several other homosexuals appear in the narrative sections of *U.S.A.* Thus Eric Egstrom, whom Eleanor Stoddard knows from the Chicago Art Institute, and Maurice Millet, her French teacher at the Berlitz School, are always together and sleep in the same bed. Dos Passos treats as droll the relationship among Eveline Hutchins, who loves Maurice; Eleanor, who is sexually frigid but has a "beautiful" mutual friendship with Eveline; and the two homosexual men:

Eleanor used to wonder about them sometimes but it
was so nice to know boys who weren't horrid about women
(*FSP*, 221).

In what sense do the homoerotic and color themes in *U.S.A.* reach a finale in the last Richard Ellsworth section of *The Big Money*? We see even more clearly than before that Savage is dangerously deceptive towards women:

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first, Daughter, for whose death he was responsible in *Nineteen-Nineteen*; now Pat Doolittle, to whom he proposes during the Harlem escapade; in the future, perhaps, one of Doc Bingham's daughters.

As for the racial theme in the trilogy—for once in *U.S.A.*, blacks have ceased to be servants or victims. After the Harlem place closes, Savage gets into a taxicab with the brown boy and “a strapping black buck he [the boy] said was his girlfriend Florence” (*BM*, 517). He is taking them to his home for breakfast. As he enters his apartment, he is struck on the head and robbed of his watch and money. Morally, Savage's fright on recovering consciousness in the morning seems thoroughly deserved as we read the apprehensions and language that run through his mind:

Now they knew his name his address his phonenum-ber. Blackmail, oh Christ. How would it be when Mother came home from Florida to find her son earning twentyfive thousand a year, junior partner of J. Ward Moorehouse being blackmailed by two nigger whores, male prostitutes receiving males? Christ. And Pat Doolittle and the Bingham girls. It would ruin his life (*BM*, 518).

Dos Passos' presentations of black-white relations and homoeroticism in *U.S.A.* cannot be schematized, though certain conclusions are obvious. Among southern white males, violence towards blacks is at or just beneath the surface; and the country in general is race conscious and discriminatory. In the trilogy Dos Passos finds both

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black-white relations and homosexuality disturbing to society, and he is antipathetic or unsympathetic towards homosexuality.

Incidents in *U.S.A.* do not reflect the thesis in *Queering the Color Line*, except for one telling detail: the brown boy in the Harlem dive says he is Gloria Swanson. Though Savage under the influence of liquor is democratic towards the black homosexuals, he never thinks of himself as black. Tony Garrido, in the Margo Dowling story, is a secondary character from a society with its own racial situation, and Dos Passos' narrative tells us little about his thought processes. But despite the very limited applicability of Ms. Somerville's book to *U.S.A.*, it will probably have uses in sociology and literature; and it has served serendipitously to occasion the musings in this essay.

Notes

1. Siobhan B. Somerville, *Queering the Color Line*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2000. The quotations from it are on p. 129.

2. All citations to Dos Passos' work are to the trilogy *U.S.A.* New York: The Modern Library, 1937. *FSP* refers to *The 42nd Parallel*, *NN* to *Nineteen-Nineteen*, and *BM* to *The Big Money*. Ms. Somerville's book makes no mention of Dos Passos or any of his works.

Obscuring Hull House— Highlighting Male Predominance in U.S.A.



A paper by one of my students, a male undergraduate about twenty years old, once referred to *U.S.A.* as a “masculine novel.” He did not go on to explain this term, as the point was only incidental in his liking the trilogy. But his designation has remained in my memory, and it provides a starting point here for a train of my own thoughts.

Dos Passos has fifty-three sections of impressionistic autobiography interspersed among other parts of the trilogy. These sections are about the development and experiences of a boy, later a young man. Thus in “Camera Eye (5)” the author tells of playing “the battle of Port Arthur in the bathtub,” and in “Camera Eye (6),” which depicts events in an English school, an American boy in a Rough Rider suit challenges him to a fight.

We note too that the assembled trilogy has a preliminary section, titled “U.S.A.,” which begins: “The young man walks fast by himself. . . . muscles ache for the knowledge of jobs”—the roadmender’s, the fisherman’s, the engineer’s, etc.—all jobs typically limited to men

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back then. And *The Big Money*, the final volume of the trilogy, concludes with the section "Vag." The young man, destitute here, tries to hitch a ride, as automobiles speed past. A similarly destitute young woman would even now attempt hitchhiking at a much greater risk to herself than would a male counterpart.

The forty-nine sections of narrative fiction in the trilogy relate the lives and careers of twelve major characters, six of each sex. Twenty-six sections are on the men, twenty-three on the women. But the first six are on Fainy McCreary, or Mac—his rooting in socialism, his youthful wanderings, and his episodes with women.

Of the major fictional women characters in *U.S.A.*, three are attracted by and fall into the orbit of J. Ward Moorehouse, a highly successful, slick, and ethically vacuous public relations entrepreneur. One, Janey Williams, becomes his secretary. The final section in the trilogy is on Mary French, a left radical journalist who four times subordinates herself to men of action in strikes or labor politics: Gus Moskowski, G. H. Barrow, Ben Compton, and Don Stevens. She comes close to being the tragic heroine of the narrative, and might be a noticeable counterweight to the preponderant masculinity of *U.S.A.* were it not for the Biographies. Only one of them is of a woman, and twenty-six are of men. The Biographies are typically in staccato rhythm—suggesting to me activity, not passivity.

They are of labor leaders, politicians, businessmen, industrialists, financiers, writers, scientists, inventors, artists, intellectuals and entertainers. I list them by name, or designation, in the order in which they appear:

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In *The 42nd Parallel*: Eugene V. Debs, Luther Burbank, Bill Haywood, William Jennings Bryan, Minor C. Keith, Andrew Carnegie, Thomas Edison, Charles Proteus Steinmetz, and Bob LaFollette.

In *Nineteen Nineteen*: John Reed, Randolph Bourne, Theodore Roosevelt, Paxton Hibben, Woodrow Wilson, The House of Morgan, Joe Hill, Wesley Everest, and the Unknown Soldier.

And in *The Big Money*: Frederick Winslow Taylor, Henry Ford, Thorstein Veblen, Isadora Duncan (the only woman), Rudolph Valentino, the Wright Brothers, Frank Lloyd Wright, William Randolph Hearst, and Samuel Insull.

Let us turn again momentarily to the narrative of *U.S.A.* There Mary French, following her junior year at Vassar, gets a summer job at Hull House, Jane Addams' settlement house, in Chicago. After her father, a physician in Colorado, dies fighting the influenza epidemic of 1918 she returns to Hull House, rather than go back to college for her senior year. But following a stay there she leaves, tired of the society of old maids, and wanting to work in the business and industrial world. Experiences in Pittsburgh lead her to do publicity work for the union in the Great Steel Strike of 1919.

After "Camera Eye (46)" and "Newsreel LII," which follow the narrative section of Mary's activity in the strike, we come to the Biography of Isadora Duncan. Would not one more Biography, of Jane Addams (1860-1935) or her friend Alice Hamilton (1869-1970), both extremely effective people who interested themselves in labor and

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industrial conditions, have been in order somewhere about here?

The careers of both would have fitted into the time frame of *U.S.A.* Addams was born five years after Eugene V. Debs. She was well-known nationally, and her autobiography *Twenty Years at Hull-House* (1910) became a best-seller. The daughter of a Hicksite Quaker—though a man who backed Abraham Lincoln in the Civil War—she refused to support America's participation in World War I. For this she got much abuse—newspapers and politicians attacking her as a traitor and a fool. In 1919 she suffered bitter attacks for her participation in Quaker efforts to get food to starving children in Germany. In summer 1927 Addams sent an open letter to Senator Borah of Idaho, the Chairman of the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, urging him to endorse a request for commutation of Sacco's and Vanzetti's death sentences on the ground of strong foreign criticism. For this she was denounced for unconstitutional and unpatriotic behavior.

Dos Passos took note of Jane Addams during World War I. Addams on returning to America in 1915 from an International Women's Congress mission to seek "continuous mediation" of the European War, had spoken at a mass meeting in New York's Carnegie Hall. There she said that before bayonet charges the European armies had to give their soldiers strong drink. For this, Richard Harding Davis, an author and journalist, attacked her bitterly for insulting the Allied soldiers. After Dos Passos got to the French front in 1917, he wrote his friend Walter Rumsey Marvin: "Jane Addams account that the soldiers were fed

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rum and ether before attacks is true. No human being can stand the performance without constant stimulants—”¹

Although there were a number of notable women with Jane Addams in Hull House, Alice Hamilton seems to me the most memorable. A member of a prominent Fort Wayne, Indiana, family, she was already a physician when she went to live in Hull House in 1897, having received her M.D. degree from the University of Michigan in 1893. After she decided that she wanted to study bacteriology, she sailed for a year's study in Germany in 1895. On returning, she studied for another year at Johns Hopkins University, and then accepted an offer to teach pathology at the Woman's Medical School of Northwestern University, in Chicago.

For some time she had been dreaming of doing settlement house work. “I had a conviction,” she later wrote, “that professional work, teaching pathology, and carrying on research would never satisfy me. I must make for myself a life full of human interest.” When Addams wrote her in the summer of 1897 that a residency at Hull House was available, she quickly accepted it. Dr. Hamilton lived there for twenty-two years, and afterwards came back for several months a year while Jane Addams was alive.

Her experiences at Hull House led to an interest in industrial diseases. “Living in a working-class quarter, coming in contact with laborers and their wives,” she wrote in her autobiography, *Exploring the Dangerous Trades* (1943), “I could not fail to hear tales of the dangers that workingmen faced....”² This led to a career of

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investigating industrial diseases—e.g., lead poisoning, silicosis, nitrous fume poisoning.

Although industrial medicine was a recognized field of study in Europe, physicians in the United States ignored it.³ As a result, when Harvard University's Medical School decided to offer a degree program in that field, it could find no qualified male candidate to teach in it. Although Harvard had never had a woman professor in any subject, and the Medical School did not admit women as students, it appointed her as Assistant Professor of Industrial Medicine in 1919. She arranged to spend the fall semester of each year teaching at Harvard, and a good part of the spring working at Hull House. Her continuing engagement in the field culminated in her standard textbook *Industrial Toxicology* (1934; revised with coauthor Harriet L. Hardy, 1949).

During her life she played a prominent part in many social and humanitarian causes. Along with Jane Addams she went to Germany in 1919 with a Quaker mission for famine relief, and like Addams was accused of being pro-German when she set about raising money to feed the children.

Hamilton was interested in the Sacco-Vanzetti case almost from the start. She was a member of a small committee, including the editor of the *Springfield Republican*, that met with Governor Fuller of Massachusetts in August 1927 and asked him to commute the sentences of the condemned men. Later she was with a group of people who kept a death watch for Sacco and Vanzetti in Boston, and two years later she spoke at a memorial service for them.

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In the course of the Sacco-Vanzetti affair she very likely had acquaintances in common with Dos Passos, and in her autobiography she listed him as among "the army of the arrested."⁴

Alice Hamilton first got to know Germany in 1895, during her year studying bacteriology there. She was in Germany once more in 1915, accompanying Jane Addams in a delegation of women from neutral countries seeking to shorten the war and bring about "a peace without victory." And in 1919, we have seen, she was again there with Jane Adams.

She went to Germany later on a Karl Schurtz Foundation fellowship awarded to her in 1932. By early spring 1933, when she left for the country, Hitler had come to power. After traveling about Germany for nine weeks, using old friendships and acquaintanceships to gain entry among Germans, she returned in revulsion at what she saw and heard, especially regarding the treatment of Jews. Upon leaving Germany she wrote Jane Addams from aboard ship: "The Statue of Liberty will give me a real thrill for the first time" (July 1, 1933).⁵

Back in the United States, she wrote articles and spoke publicly against Nazism and even, in late August 1933, met with President Franklin D. Roosevelt at Hyde Park. Her articles on Nazism in the *New York Times* were: "An Inquiry into the Nazi Mind," August 6, 1933, section 6, and "The Youth Who Are Hitler's Strength," October 8, 1933, section 6. In *Harper's* she published "The Plight of the German Intellectuals" (January 1934), and in the

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Atlantic "Hitler Speaks: the Book Reveals the Man" (October 1933), an exposition and acute analysis of *Mein Kampf*. Besides these she had three long articles in *Survey Graphic*, a journal on social conditions: "Below the Surface" (September 1933), mainly on the situation of German Jews; "Sound and Fury in Germany" (November 1933), on labor and social services among the Nazis; and "Woman's Place in Germany" (January 1934).

If we have devoted more space to Alice Hamilton than to Jane Addams, it is because Addams has been the far better-known figure. But both Addams and Hamilton may be considered together in our asking why only one woman, a dancer, was the subject of a Biography in *U.S.A.* Perhaps the answer lies in who had the economic and political power in the United States. Alice Hamilton, in her sixties, said of her country: "My idea is that the American man gives over to woman all the things he is profoundly disinterested in, and keeps business and politics to himself."⁶

For much of the time when Dos Passos was working on *U.S.A.*, he held to his view "all right we are two nations," enunciated in "Camera Eye (50)," which deals with and is situated by accounts of the final hours of the Sacco-Vanzetti affair. In Dos Passos' autobiographical *The Theme Is Freedom* (1956), he wrote: "It was somewhere during the years of the early New Deal that I rejoined the United States."⁷ In contrast, Jane Addams and Alice Hamilton, however aggrieved by political and judicial events, never severed allegiance to the system. They continued to work within it.

In birth, education, and manners, both Addams and Hamilton were parts of upper-middle-class America. As one of Addams' biographers has written of her success, "She was able to obtain gifts of money and service from the well-to-do and social elite in Chicago in part because she was one of them."⁸ Similarly Alice Hamilton enjoyed access to and good will from factory owners because of her social background, and sometimes through her class contacts.⁹ Perhaps there seemed too much of polite society and "uplifting" about Hull House for Dos Passos to care for it. His mother and he had suffered embarrassment, and probably humiliation, because of his birth out of wedlock, and this made him hostile to any tinge of social snobbery.

There was nothing of polite society about Emma Goldman, whom Dos Passos names three times in "Camera Eye (26)." Yet though Dos Passos found Goldman sympathetic, he wrote no Biography of her either.¹⁰ A likely reason for the 26-1 man-woman ratio among subjects of the Biographies is that Dos Passos wanted to depict a country dominated by males. So patent is his depiction sometimes that bits of the trilogy—e.g., "Camera Eye (6)"—are satires of American stereotypic masculinity. *U.S.A.* provides such a memorable picture of the United States that a maverick reader might fantasize smuggling one more Biography, "Hull House," in as a counterpoise to "The House of Morgan"—with its succession of profiteers from misery.

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Notes

1. Letter of August 23, 1917.
2. Alice Hamilton, *Exploring the Dangerous Trades* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1943), pp. 55-56 ("I had a conviction"); p. 114 ("Living in a working-class").
3. A major theme in the Biographies in *U.S.A.* is that American inventors and technical innovators, like Henry Ford, do not realize or care about how their achievements will affect society. American physicians' ignoring of industrial medicine—which then had no payoff in dollars—was in keeping with this attitude. Dr. Hamilton's work in the field sought to alleviate decades of destruction to workers' health due to manufacturing practices.
4. Hamilton, *Exploring the Dangerous Trades*, p. 276 ("the army"). In "Camera Eye (50)," about Sacco's and Vanzetti's executions, Dos Passos writes that "the old American speech of the haters of oppression is new tonight . . . in the mouth of a Back Bay social-worker. . . ." The social worker was Elizabeth Glendower Evans, who drew Hamilton, her close friend Katherine Codman, and later Felix Frankfurter into the case.
5. Barbara Sicherman, *Alice Hamilton: A Life in Letters* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 343.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
7. *The Theme Is Freedom* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1956), p. 103.
8. Allen F. Davis, *American Heroine: The Life and Legend of Jane Addams* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 106.
9. See Hamilton, *Exploring the Dangerous Trades*, pp. 8-9, 15.
10. When I asked Dos Passos about any influence Goldman may have had on his political or social views before 1936, he answered: "Seemed then as she does now a sympathetic but a slightly comic figure." Response to questionnaire from Melvin Landsberg, September 23, 1957.

Dos Passos' *U.S.A.* *Biographies and* *"The Literature of Power"*



When my university's library acquired the formidable twenty-four volume set of the *American National Biography*, the successor to the *Dictionary of American Biography*, I set about familiarizing myself with it.¹ Given my interest in John Dos Passos' *U.S.A.*, I had the idea of reading the *ANB* accounts of the subjects of Dos Passos' non-fictional biographical pieces in the trilogy. The contributors to *ANB* would have had access to about a half century of scholarship produced after Dos Passos' work, but my immediate object was not to see how Dos Passos might require correction. It was to compare his creative methods with the methods of *ANB* biographers of the same people. My comparisons could be comprehensive rather than representative, for all of Dos Passos non-fictional subjects except Wesley Everest are subjects of *ANB* articles.²

I knew what to expect in a general way, as *ANB* articles were "encyclopaedic," and Dos Passos' pieces were

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“literary.” But Dos Passos’ sorcery was in the particulars, which I will examine in this essay.

A typical *ANB* biography begins with the subject’s full name (e.g., Veblen, Thorstein Bunde), the date and place of birth, and the date of death. It briefly characterizes the subject, offers some information about the parents’ backgrounds, and sometimes their influence, and then proceeds to a chronological account of the subject’s life. Whether the subject be a politician, inventor, industrialist, financier, or artist, the article offers details about the manner and nature of his or her achievements. Along the way the biographer allows himself some interpretation, and after indicating the circumstances of the subject’s death, concludes with an interpretative summation, and occasionally an account of contending interpretations. A brief bibliography follows.

The *ANB*’s articles are well-organized, clearly written, comprehensive and impersonal. But with occasional modest exceptions, they are not written to make any main point. In contrast, every one of Dos Passos’ biographical pieces aims at making its point or often its points, and he has selected his data to make them. A Dos Passos piece does not assume that you have a prior interest in the subject. Its task is to make the biography compelling as soon as you encounter it, and to make it unforgettable after you have read it. The *ANB* biographies present “the literature of knowledge,” and Dos Passos’ pieces “the literature of power.”

Here I am using the once well-known phrases of Thomas De Quincey (1785-1859), the English essayist

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and critic. In a discussion of Alexander Pope's poetry, he distinguishes merely instructive from imaginative literature—that which teaches us from that which moves us. Imaginative literature, the literature of power, he says, addresses itself to the “great *moral* capacities of man.” Then he goes on to explain: “Tragedy, romance, fairy tale, or epopee, all alike restore to man's mind the ideal of justice, of hope, of truth, of mercy, of retribution, which else (left to the support of daily life in its realities) would languish for want of sufficient illustration.”³

Even the titles of Dos Passos' biographies hold out the prospect of the literature of power. Only two, “Randolph Bourne” and “Joe Hill,” are the subject's proper names. Typically Dos Passos' titles are tags to engage our interest, promising a story, sometimes with the aid of their allusiveness or tone: “Lover of Mankind” (Eugene V. Debs); “Emperor of the Caribbean” (Minor C. Keith); “Playboy” (John Reed); “A Hoosier Quixote” (Paxton Hibben); “The Bitter Drink” (Thorstein Veblen); “The Campers at Kitty Hawk” (Orville and Wilbur Wright); “Poor Little Rich Boy” (William Randolph Hearst).

Of Dos Passos' twenty-six biographical pieces, seven begin *in medias res* and two (J. P. Morgan's and Minor C. Keith's) with the subject's death. But whether, as literary works, they begin at the beginning (as does, say, the Moses story in the Bible); the middle (as in, say, *The Iliad*), or at the end (as in, say, Milton's “Lycidas”), they typically start with some novel concept or some concrete detail to engage the reader's attention.

The piece on Veblen starts *in medias res*:

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Veblen,

a greyfaced shambling man lolling resentful at his desk with his cheek on his hand, in a low sarcastic mumble of intricate phrases subtly paying out the logical inescapable rope of matteroffact for a society to hang itself by. . . .

That on Minor C. Keith, a founder of the United Fruit Company, begins with the subject's death:

When Minor C. Keith died all the newspapers carried his picture, a brighteyed man with a hawknose and a respectable bay window, and an uneasy look under the eyes.

Much of Dos Passos' biographical material is in free verse or prose poetry, and most of the pieces are amenable to individual study by the analytical methods employed by New Critics. (See, e.g., Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, *Understanding Poetry*, first published in 1938). But to say this is to say little as, I repeat, the sorcery is in the particulars.

Here is a brief free-verse passage from the Edison biography, "The Electrical Wizard." Dos Passos uses plodding, repetitive prosody to describe the unimaginative aspect of three great American achievers:

Thomas A. Edison at eightytwo worked sixteen hours
a day;

he never worried about mathematics or the social system
or generalized philosophical concepts;

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in collaboration with Henry Ford and Harvey Firestone
who never worried about mathematics or the social system
or generalized philosophical concepts. . . .

In a passage from "Tin Lizzie," the piece on Ford, Dos
Passos' virtuosity with rhythm is much more spectacular
than in the Edison biography. Note that we have a single
periodic sentence with alliteration (a combination which
Walt Whitman used in his *Lilacs* elegy).

At Ford's production was improving all the time; less waste,
more spotters, strawbosses, stool-pigeons (fifteen minutes
for lunch, three minutes to go to the toilet, the Taylorized
speedup everywhere, reach under, adjust washer, screw
down bolt, shove in cotterpin, reachunder adjustwasher,
screwdown bolt, reachunderadjustscrewdownreachunderad-
just until every ounce of life was sucked off into production
and at night the workmen went home grey shaking husks).

("Gray shaking husks" might remind one of Shake-
speare's phrase "bare ruined choirs" in Sonnet 73, both
phrases suggesting devastation.)

Like traditional verse, and rhetoric too, Dos Passos'
presentations sometimes use recurring verbal formulas as
refrains or near refrains. I shall cite several instances. In
"Playboy," he writes twice, "Reed was a westerner and
words meant what they said," and a third time, "Reed was
a westerner words meant what they said." Dos Passos also
has "why not revolution?" three times in "Playboy"; and

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three times, with variations, "a man's got to like many things in his life."

Within the Woodrow Wilson piece, he incorporates the formula "Did Meester Veelson see . . .?" or "Did Meester Veelson know. . .?" three times. Writing of Minor C. Keith, he twice uses the strategically placed formula "Minor Keith didn't die," and also uses the phrase "uneasy look under the eyes" at the end as well as at the beginning of the piece.

In the Morgan biography he uses the parenthetical comment "(war and panics on the stock exchange, bankruptcies, warloans, good growing weather for the House of Morgan)" and at the end of the piece adds "machinegun-fire and arson" and "starvation, lice, cholera, and typhus" to the formula, in a manner perhaps reminding us of incremental repetition in verse.

Dos Passos' poetic skills, practices, and devices are indeed too numerous to recount in this brief essay. I list only a few of the other outstanding ones.

1. The exact word and the memorable phrase: Veblen's memorial—"the sharp clear prism of his mind."
2. The telling detail, as in the sketch of Woodrow Wilson: "while he was courting [the girl he married] he coached her in how to use the broad 'a'."
3. The use of allusion, as in the biography of William Randolph Hearst: "never man enough to cross the Rubicon."
4. Metonymy and synecdoche: William Jennings

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Bryan—"a silver tongue in a big mouth."

5. The technique in the sketches of John Reed, Isadora Duncan, and Rudolph Valentino of being both outside and inside the character.
6. The employment of tempo, so that we experience the furious pace of Isadora Duncan's life, and are brought up short by the abrupt conclusion of the piece, with a similarly rapid tempo, as if in mockery of the rushing account of her career:

The heavy trailing scarf caught in a wheel, wound tight. Her head was wrenched against the side of the car. The car stopped instantly; her neck was broken, her nose crushed, Isadora was dead.

Dos Passos makes repeated use of irony in the biographical sketches—as the New Critics were continually speaking of irony, I suspect that their lack of attention to him was partly due to their different social and political beliefs. There is, for instance, the irony in "Tin Lizzie," where the very man who introduced mass production of automobiles does not understand how it altered the economy. Moralistically he blames the stock market crash of 1929 on "people's gambling and getting into debt."

"The Campers at Kitty Hawk" is a more complex piece of irony. Here, in a prose poem with sections of free verse, Dos Passos writes in admiration of the two young mechanics from Dayton, Ohio, who, solving centuries-old problems, constructed and flew the first airplane. At the same time he tells of their efforts to cash in on their

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invention; besides being mechanics they were businessmen in the American mold. The Wright brothers demonstrate their invention before European heads of state and receive a shower of medals. Now without transition the biographical account ends, and we are with Dos Passos' generation in World War I as he and others cower before machine-gun fire from attacking aircraft. But despite the wake of wartime carnage, and the exploitation of a new industry by financiers (in this exploitation Dos Passos sees the brothers as tainted with guilt) the author feels exaltation in the technical achievement of the two young men.

Viewing this piece we can see Dos Passos—influenced we know by Thorstein Veblen—yearning to separate inventors and technicians from the big-business and military civilization in which they are immersed. As an innovator and craftsman in language (this is mostly implicit in U.S.A.) he has separated himself from the pollution of high finance and carnage, and wishes the Wright brothers had desired and been able to do the same.⁴

The critic Waldo Frank once wrote that H. L. Mencken brought energy to despair.⁵ In contrast, as we see in the biographical sketches in *U.S.A.*, Dos Passos brought energy to scorn (e.g., for Minor C. Keith), hope (e.g., for Frank Lloyd Wright), defiance (e.g., of William Randolph Hearst), and admiration (e.g., for Robert M. LaFollette). It was because of Dos Passos' energetic resistance to the social outrages about him that he appealed to many of his contemporaries in the 1930s. His imaginative treatment of the subjects and his moral desiderata make his biographies

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choice examples of the "literature of power" in American letters.

Notes

1. *American National Biography*, edited by John A. Garraty and Mark C. Carnes (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

2. "Vag," in *The Big Money*, might be regarded as a fictional biography.

3. Thomas De Quincey, Review of "The Works of Alexander Pope, Esquire. By W. Roscoe, Esq." *North American Review*, August, 1848. In *De Quincey's Literary Criticism* (ed., H. Darbishire). London: Henry Frowde, 1909. Consulted in reprint by Folcroft Library Editions (1973), pp. 94, 96.

4. The contrast between Dos Passos as depicted in "The Camera Eye" and the public relations men depicted in narrative sections of *U.S.A.* is implicit. On Veblen's influence and on writers as technicians and inventors, see Melvin Landsberg, *Dos Passos' Path to "U.S.A."* (Boulder: Colorado Associated University Press, 1972), pp. 174, 224.

5. Waldo Frank, *The Re-discovery of America* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929), p. 321.

An Elegy for the Unknown Soldier



Ninety thousand people filed past the body of the American Unknown Soldier as it lay in the Rotunda of the Capitol in Washington, D.C. on November 10, 1921. First, in Europe, a soldier's body had been chosen from each of the four permanent U.S. cemeteries there, taken to Châlons-sur Marne, and brought to a small room in the City Hall. An American sergeant then went into that room and placed flowers on one of the four coffins.¹ Amid ceremony, that coffin was then brought to the United States on the *Olympia*, flagship of the late Admiral George Dewey.

At 8:30 A.M. on November 11 the coffin was carried to a caisson in the Capitol Plaza. Huge crowds watched as a military funeral procession accompanying the body passed down Capitol Hill and Pennsylvania Avenue to the White House. Immediately behind the caisson marched President Harding, with General Pershing at his left. Behind these two marched Vice President Coolidge and a ranking admiral, then Chief Justice Taft and another ranking admiral. Following them came the associate justices of the U.S. Supreme Court, more military, governors of the

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States, members of the Cabinet, the U.S. Senators, eight abreast, then the U.S. House of Representatives. Former President Woodrow Wilson, who had suffered a stroke, was unable to march. He rode with his wife in an open victoria, wearing a poppy on the left lapel of his coat.

Behind the military and the civilian notables from the government, representatives of many organizations—from the Grand Army of the Republic, the Confederate Veterans, the Colored Veterans of the War, the Red Cross through the Rotary Club and the Georgetown Cadets—marched in columns. When the funeral procession, after going seventeen blocks, passed the White House, the enfeebled Wilson returned to his residence, and the U.S. government officials left to ride by automobile to Arlington National Cemetery. But the military escorting the caisson proceeded on foot to the cemetery, as did thousands of members of the patriotic societies.

Admission to the amphitheater at Arlington was by ticket only. Perhaps five thousand people were admitted, and tens of thousands of others gathered outside. From the main entrance to the amphitheater, body bearers carried the coffin to the stage and placed it on a catafalque there. Seated on the stage were many notables, including Marshal Foch of France, General Jacques of Belgium, General Diaz of Italy, Arthur James Balfour of Great Britain, Premier Briand of France, and U.S. Secretary of State Hughes. Still other notables occupied boxes. Three sections of the amphitheater directly fronting the stage were filled with U.S. Senators and Representatives and their families, and other sections held wounded soldiers.

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Congressional Medal of Honor winners, and Gold Star mothers.²

We turn to the ceremonies at the amphitheater, relying, as above, on the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* for our material. The *Post*, the only newspaper that Dos Passos mentions in his piece on the Unknown Soldier, "The Body of an American," had on its front page a long feature article by George Rothwell Brown, a political journalist, who wrote of the Soldier's being honored by "the mighty country for which he gladly gave his life." When Harding came up to the flag-covered casket, Brown wrote, a noteworthy event transpired: "A light, thin haze had hung in the sky nearly all morning, but now, as the President began speaking, the sun for the first time scattered away the clouds and fell full upon his face, softly illuminating it, a very happy omen, it seemed."³

The *Washington Post*'s lead article made similar use of the sun: "Just as the cortege reached the tomb," it reported, "the clouds that had hung low all day, parted and the feeble rays of an autumnal sun filtered down on the casket. It was as if the heavens had opened to receive the spirit of the dead hero."⁴

Reading "The Body of an American" in *Nineteen-nineteen* (1932) one is fascinated by Dos Passos' effrontery in satirizing the august commemoration of November 11, 1921. Actually, he was in Baghdad on November 11, having sailed for Europe in March and, after a stay there, gone on a writer's journey to Turkey, the Soviet Caucasus, Iran, and some of the Arab lands.

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However his novel *Three Soldiers* appeared in 1921 and was being reviewed in October of that year.⁵ Although the novel's close antecedence to the November 11 ceremonies was coincidental, it struck a note of opposition to officially sustained versions of wartime service. In his elegy "The Body of an American" Dos Passos struck that note again but now more specifically. He placed the elegy, strategically, at the very end of *Nineteen-nineteen*, the second volume of *U.S.A.*, which deals with the war years.

"The Body of an American" is a brilliantly written modernist elegy, with some of its roots in the traditional pastoral elegy—e.g., Milton's "Lycidas" and Shelley's "Adonais," in English literature. As we shall see, it fictionalizes details, and should not be read as factual history.

The work is a montage, juxtaposing and interweaving four voices:

1. An initial voice giving a slurring, perfunctory rendition of President Harding's proclamation on bringing the body of an American back for burial in the memorial amphitheater of Arlington National Cemetery.⁶

2. The author's narrative voice.

3. A newspaper account of the memorial service, alternating glib patriotism with pleasure in the pageantry.

4. The imagined voice of the Unknown Soldier, shortly before his death.

The voice reciting Harding's proclamation has all the concern of a courtroom clerk asking: "Doyou solemnly swear to tell the truth the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?" It is Dos Passos' introduction to what is being played out as an outpouring of national emotion.

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Without transition we are in a “tarpaper morgue” in Châlons-sur-Marne, where several American soldiers endure the stench to choose a corpse. The soldier directing the operation is saying:

Make sure he ain’t a dinge, boys.

make sure he ain’t a guinea or a kike...

But, asks the author’s voice in mimicry, how can the soldiers tell? There is so little left of these dead.

Without transition again, we are reading a newspaper account of the ceremony:

The day withal was too meaningful and tragic for applause. Silence, tears, songs, and prayer, muffled drums and soft music were the instrumentalities today of national approbation.

We go on to some of Dos Passos’ biography of the Unknown Soldier. The narrating voice is tough and clipped, and his account is made up entirely of specifics, in contrast to the syrupy abstractions found in the newspaper account: “meaningful,” “tragic,” “national approbation.”

The narrator’s list of the Soldier’s possible identities may remind us of sections 15 and 16 of Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself.”⁷ It is interrupted by the newspaper account:

though this was a time of mourning, such an assemblage necessarily has about it a touch of color. In the boxes are seen the court uniforms of foreign diplomats, the gold braid of our own and foreign fleets and armies, the black of the conventional mourning dress of American statesmen, the varicolored furs and outdoor wrappings of mothers and sisters come to mourn...

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The list of the Soldier's possible identities then is taken up again, and then again followed by the newspaper account. Then Dos Passos' narration continues with the Unknown Soldier's life:

Naked he went into the army;
they weighed you, measured you...charted your urine and
your intelligence...

In the same clipped language the narrator proceeds to recount typical experiences in a U.S. soldier's basic training and typical phrases to which the Unknown Soldier would have been subjected during his brief life. These are contrasted with the primary biological sensations of a human being. Narrator's voice and Soldier's voice merge as Dos Passos gives us likely and possible circumstances of the Soldier's death. The account is interrupted three times by a refrain in the Soldier's voice, the first instance being: "Say feller tell me how I can get back to my outfit," and the third a frightened: "Say soldier for chrissake can't you tell me how I can get back to my outfit?"

The Soldier's primal animal sensations (e.g., heart pumping blood) are matched by his experiences in nature ("tiny striped snails hung on the underside of the blades"). But "the shell had his number on it," says the narrator, using an item from the wartime bag of clichés. In Washington, D.C., mourners with their own agendas subject the remnants of the body to their rites and oratory.

I have spoken of "The Body of an American" as an elegy. But, one could ask, may we call it a poem at all? I

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believe so. Much of it is written in free verse, whether line by line or run together in prose paragraphs. Like Whitman, Dos Passos makes extensive use of parallelism. Dos Passos' piece is rhythmic, except in the first paragraph, where he deliberately has discord. And at points where the still-alive Soldier speaks for himself, his lines are not only a refrain, but also one with incremental repetition.

Richard P. Adams, in an essay "Whitman's 'Lilacs' and the Tradition of the Pastoral Elegy," says: "Of seventeen devices commonly used in pastoral elegies from Bion to [Matthew] Arnold, seven appear in 'Lilacs.'⁸ Going through Adams' list of all seventeen, I find that nine appear in "The Body of an American"—I use Adams' words in listing them:

1. "The dramatic framework" (here used partially)
2. "The announcement that the speaker's friend or alter ego is dead and is to be mourned"
3. "the funeral procession with other mourners"
4. "the eulogy of the dead man"
5. "The dead man's biography"
6. "The account of when and how the man died"
7. "The account of the dying speech and death"
8. "The placing of flowers on the bier"
9. "The resolution of the poem in some formula of comfort or reconciliation"

Of course, some of these devices are used ironically or sardonically, for "The Body of an American" is a satirical expose of the State's myth, as it was expressed in the orations of government officials and in the columns of establishmentarian newspapers. From the start, Dos Passos' method is to depict facade and reality.

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We begin our illustration of this method with the announcement that the speaker's friend or alter ego is dead and is to be mourned. But the announcement is President Harding's proclamation, offered without thought or emotion. For the narrator, who shared in the Soldier's experiences and might have encountered him (as the reader knows from "The Camera Eye" in *Nineteen-nineteen*), the Soldier is a military acquaintance.

Dos Passos gives us, we have said, historical fiction, not history. Never mind that only one soldier, a sergeant, chose among four coffins, not four visible bodies, at Châlons-sur-Marne.⁹ "Enie menie minie moe," says the narrator, using a racist counting formula.

A listing of the soldier's possible identities is interrupted by the newspaper "excerpt" on dress and color at the amphitheater.¹⁰ Following a resumption of the listing, the newspaper article again interrupts by describing and quoting President Harding as he concludes his speech. The Chief Executive is introduced by the fatuous comment: "President Harding with a reverence seemingly more significant because of his high temporal station..." (Might this be in mockery of Brown's report of the "very happy omen"?) Harding makes the problematic assertion: "As a typical soldier of this representative democracy he fought and died believing in the indisputable justice of his country's cause." Then he offers the Lord's Prayer. For officialdom this is the elegiac resolution in a formula of comfort or reconciliation.

Dos Passos' refutation of this formula will come with his comment on the Soldier's death:

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The blood ran into the ground, the brains oozed out of the cracked skull and were licked up by the trenchrats, the belly swelled and raised a generation of bluebottle flies...

But we have moved ahead of ourselves. After Harding's Lord's Prayer passage, the narrator resumes his account of the Soldier's life. He describes the young man going into the army, where recruits are processed as if on a conveyer belt. The President's eulogy of the dead man is mocked by the depiction of the processing of the man's body and mind. Never do we find the Soldier genuinely thinking.

Though we do not have a procession of mourners from the Capitol—for artistic purposes, Dos Passos foreshortened events—mourners we have aplenty towards the end of Dos Passos' piece: Harding and "the diplomats and the generals and the admirals and the brasshats and the politicians and the handsomely dressed ladies out of the society column of the *Washington Post*."

We conclude with what in the traditional pastoral elegy is the "placing of flowers on the bier." But we have, instead, mostly the bestowal of medals. In reality the medals were pinned or placed on the flag draping the Unknown Soldier's coffin. Dos Passos renders this bitterly and unforgettably with "Where his chest ought to have been they pinned..."

After the coffin was put into the sarcophagus, Hamilton Fish, Jr. (a conservative congressman and prominent anti-Communist in 1932) placed a wreath on the tomb. A U.S. war mother, who had lost a son, and a British war mother, who had lost three sons, also placed wreaths

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there. The Chief of the Crow nation, Plenty Coops, then placed his feathered war bonnet and his coup stick on the sarcophagus.

Dos Passos describes this selectively and sardonically in the final lines of the elegy, and combines medals, wreaths, and Indian wampum in the pinning. "All the Washingtonians brought flowers," he says in the penultimate line.

A final section, of only a single line, concludes the elegy: "Woodrow Wilson brought a bouquet of poppies." We have seen that Wilson, incapacitated by a stroke, returned home when the funeral procession reached the White House. But Dos Passos did not wish to allow any sympathy for "Meester Veelson,"¹¹ whom he saw as betraying his anti-interventionist followers and leading the United States into war. In the elegy, Wilson makes an appearance at Arlington Cemetery, and the poppy on his lapel has turned into a bouquet.

Bitterness is absent in Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," a greater American elegy, which in its mood of national reconciliation provides a contrast to "The Body of an American." But bitterness is an element in "Lycidas" and "Adonais." Milton in honoring Edward King, refers to English bishops as "blind mouths." Shelley thus addresses the anonymous reviewer whom he represents as having killed John Keats: "Thou noteless blot on a remembered name." Dos Passos seems even more bitter than Milton and Shelley, and his bitterness is expressed in the very strategy of the elegy—he exposes the chief mourners as the veritable killers.

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Notes

1. *New York Times*, October 24, 1921, p. 5.
2. On the funeral procession from the Capitol and on the ceremonies at Arlington, see *New York Times*, November 12, 1921, pp. 1-2; *Washington Post*, November 11, 1921, p. 2; November 12, 1921, pp. 1, 4, 6.
3. George Rothwell Brown in *Washington Post*, November 12, 1921, pp. 1, 6.
4. *Washington Post*, November 12, 1921, p. 4.
5. Melvin Landsberg, *Dos Passos' Path to "U.S.A."* Boulder: Colorado Associated University Press, pp. 67-77.
6. For the text of Harding's proclamation, see *New York Times*, October 1, 1921, p. 15.
7. In the ninth edition (1891-92) of *Leaves of Grass*.
8. Richard P. Adams, "Whitman's 'Lilacs' and the Tradition of the Pastoral Elegy," *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 72 (June, 1957), 479-487. All the quotations are on p. 479.
9. For the selection of the body, see *New York Times*, October 24, 1921, pp. 1, 5.
10. I dutifully searched the *Washington Post* (the only newspaper mentioned in Dos Passos' piece) and the *New York Times* to see whether the excerpts might have come from one of their columns, and ascertained that they had not. I might have searched further; but in view of the fictions in Dos Passos' piece, of his gift for parody, and of the excerpts not being credited, I take them to be parodic fiction.
Some of the actual newspaper reporting in the *Times* and *Post* was so far from communicating grief that Dos Passos in his parody may have thought it best to subdue the resulting irony. Consider the subject of clothing. The *New York Times*, in paragraph after paragraph listing notables in the amphitheater, described their dress and decorations in detail (November 12, 1921, p. 2). The *Washington Post* offered a society-type article, on over two thousand women marching to Arlington, with a subhead declaring: "Salvation Lassies Lend Picturesque Color." Contrasting the marchers with some other women, the *Post* reported: "Those who stepped out of limousines and occupied reserved seats held for notables and representatives of organizations within the amphitheater would have honored any fashion parade ever held on Connecticut Avenue"—and it went on to give details (November 12, 1921, p. 4).
11. Title of Dos Passos' biography of Wilson in *Nineteen-nineteen*. On Dos Passos' view of Wilson, see also Landsberg, *Dos Passos' Path to U.S.A.*, pp. 194-195.

*A Novelist and his Biographer**



Future biographers of John Dos Passos will be indebted to his correspondence with Charles W. Bernardin, which recently became available at the University of Virginia's Alderman Library. A scholar of French Canadian background, Bernardin (1917-1996) was born in Lawrence, Massachusetts, got his college education and his first year of graduate work at Roman Catholic institutions and his doctorate at the University of Wisconsin, and then went on to teach at two Catholic universities, Fordham (1948-1953) and Villanova. He served as Chairman of Villanova's English department between 1954 and 1976, becoming a full professor in 1960. His ambitious Dos Passos scholarship did not preclude a broader life; he was the father of nine children, and in his later years wrote a detailed multivolume work on his family's genealogy.

Bernardin's doctoral studies at Wisconsin began in 1942, but were interrupted by service in the U.S. Army (Guam, 1943-1946). Prior to Wisconsin he had gotten a B.A. degree (1939) from Assumption College, in Worcester, Massachusetts, and an M.A. degree (1942)

* Please see the Appendix for four letters from Dos Passos to the biographer, Charles W. Bernardin.

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from Boston College Graduate School. He received his Ph.D. degree in 1949 after writing a dissertation "The Development of John Dos Passos," but his interest in the novelist antedated attendance at Wisconsin: Bernardin's M.A. thesis bore the title "A Perilous Passage: John Dos Passos."

His correspondence with Dos Passos, which seems to have started in late 1941, continued at least to 1966. Of the approximately 157 letters, questionnaires, and miscellaneous items in the Alderman Library collection, one was placed on deposit by Elizabeth Dos Passos, the novelist's widow, after his death in 1970, and some 156 more were donated by the Bernardin family in 1999.

The collection begins with a letter Dos Passos wrote on January 3, 1942, seeking to correct the "misconception" in Bernardin's thesis (presumably his M.A. thesis) that social and political protest in America between 1919 and 1933 could be equated with communism. (For the text of the letter, please see p. 15 below.)

By mid-1943 Bernardin must have wanted to write Dos Passos' biography, as on June 15 of that year Dos Passos wrote him a letter beginning with the advice: "The biography of a novelist is to be found in his books, it seems to me, rather more than that of any other kind of a writer." Still, Dos Passos did not squelch the project. "I wish you'd wait fifty years—but anyway, good luck," he told Bernardin, saying too that he would be glad to aid him with dates, etc., and give him some names of people who could help.

After receiving a manuscript from Bernardin, Dos Passos wrote him on May 26, 1950, "Don't you think

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your chapters are pretty detailed? Anyway that's your business. They seem tolerably accurate." But he could not keep himself from remonstrating: "Lord if you put in so much biography when are you going to get room for the critical study?"

Bernardin must have been encouraged by Dos Passos' letter of May 22, 1951, which said: "I . . . have to repeat how much I admire your industry" (though Dos Passos added in the margin: "I only wish it were being applied to some other victim.") "The only way to do is to dig out every damn deceitful speck of information if you want to find out something."

A college friend of Dos Passos, Arthur McComb, wrote him from Boston on October 1, 1951:

... I've been in touch with Bernardin in connection with the book he is writing about you—A year or so ago I gave him some anecdotes, opinions etc. for his Spanish chapter,¹ and answered various questions. He has now shewn me his chapter (or rather sent it, I've never seen him actually) He seems polite & appreciative. But I did not know he was going to quote me in those few pages—and a good deal, too. He will send you the chapter of course.

Dos Passos replied on Thanksgiving Day, 1951:

I hope Bernardin hasn't made himself a nuisance. He's a distressingly thorough young man. I did my best to explain to him that his function was to follow and not precede the undertaker—but since he insists on continuing with his rash

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enterprise I've sent him what data I could remember. . . .
Write your memoir of that period in Spain. It will be worth a
great more than poor B's strainings to comprehend—though
as you say he's polite, appreciative and (I add) industrious.
Its his industry I find disarming.

From Edmund Wilson's house in Wellfleet, Massachusetts (which the critic had lent Dos Passos for a month) Dos Passos, on August 1, 1952, wrote Bernardin about material the latter had sent:

I wasn't able to read through this very carefully but did catch
a couple of things which I have noted on separate sheets.
You've certainly gone to great pains; that's the first requisite,
and the rarest, in the production of a good book—

Bernardin was reaching the end of his career at Fordham, as Dos Passos' letter to him in early 1953 shows:

I certainly hope you find yourself a teaching job in a
more congenial atmosphere. Maybe you'd better do some
work on Jacques Maritain or Bernardos [Bernanos] or
somebody like that for a change, or a study of somebody a
hundred years back. I'm afraid your present task hasn't been
very rewarding. Anyway it's finished and you can always
use it as an obituary. . . . Better luck next time

When Bernardin asked him about literary agents, Dos Passos referred him to Bernice Baumgartner, at his agency Brandt and Brandt (letter of August 20, 1953), adding: "I doubt very much whether she would want to take it on

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right now. My stock is rather low on the literary exchanges at present." He suggested that Bernardin might turn to Joel Barlow or John Wilkes as a subject for a study.

Bernardin's article "John Dos Passos' Harvard Years" appeared in the *New England Quarterly* in March 1954. A well-written, almost entirely biographical, and occasionally anecdotal piece, it cited a letter from Dos Passos to the author as a source, but said nothing about the novelist's extensive help with a biography. Besides crediting the novelist's letter, the article cited letters from three of Dos Passos' fellow students at Harvard: S. Foster Damon, Kenneth Murdock, and Stewart Mitchell. (The latter two were among the current editors of the *New England Quarterly*.) For biographical materials, Bernardin drew upon some of Dos Passos' fictional writings at Harvard and on his Richard Ellsworth Savage story in *Nineteen-Nineteen*; and for some of the background he used Malcolm Cowley's discussion of Harvard aesthetes in his *After the Genteel Tradition*.

Over six years later, probably in fall 1961, Bernardin wrote Dos Passos about the possibility of the University of Oklahoma Press' publishing his biography. He also asked Dos Passos to support him for a Guggenheim Fellowship.

Dos Passos answered on October 14:

It was nice to hear from you and to hear that things are going well with you. The U. of Oklahoma has seemed to me to be one of the best of the college presses. I should think they would be good people to work with. Go ahead with Guggenheim etc: it's a little embarrassing to appear as

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a sponsor of someone who is writing about my own work,
but I guess I can stand it.

There followed more queries from Bernardin—for help with bibliography, for specific information, and for comment on his text.

In March 1962 Bernardin wrote that he planned to submit his entire manuscript to Dos Passos before it was printed, in about September. He asked for comments on his chapter "Juvenilia," and for pictures to illustrate the biography. The novelist, in a letter of October 12, 1962—written after his return from a journey to South America—told him: "Congratulations on finally pinning down the U. of Okla."

Alas, there were further delays, attributable to Bernardin's scholarly conscience. Arthur McComb wrote Dos Passos on October 20, 1962:

I have had a few lines from Bernardin whom I last heard from 10 or more years ago. The Oklahoma Univ. Press is going to do his book in 2 vols. He asks to examine yr letters to me (having seen Aron's book)² I have replied that I have all y' letters of the last 20 years and all post-cards since 1916—but have not encouraged him He can consult the letters which Aron saw.— This is to keep you *au courant*.

Dos Passos' reply on November 2 imposed a barrier:

2 vols is really appalling—yet he who says "a" must say "b". I foolishly encouraged Bernardin years ago. I dont know that I want him reading all my letters. Suppose I wanted to

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print them myself? If you can satisfy him with the ones Aron saw it might be sufficient—one or two others maybe—but not too many.

Bernardin sent Dos Passos further queries and lengthy questionnaires in 1962 and 1963, and Dos Passos continued responding. On January 22, 1964, Bernardin wrote that yesterday he had mailed him the third revision of the first volume; he had not intended to revise the volume after the press accepted the second revision, he said, but had found it necessary. Once again he invited comments.

On February 11, 1964, Dos Passos wrote him: "I think on the whole you have produced an accurate picture." But he had an objection regarding a major character in *Manhattan Transfer*:

Incidentally, I dont think you are right to connect Elaine Oglethorpe with Elaine Orr. She's much more like another girl I knew at the same time. Maybe you push these analogies between fiction characters and living people too hard.

He sent Bernardin letters containing additional corrections or information on February 14, 1964, and November 18, 1965. On January 25, 1966 he returned a questionnaire to Bernardin, and on June 24, 1966, sent him another letter with information.

According to Ann Southwell, Manuscript Cataloger at Alderman Library's Special Collections Department, the Bernardin papers there include an unpublished two-

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volume biography of Dos Passos: the first, covering the novelist's life through *Three Soldiers*' publication, was completed; the second, taking it through *Manhattan Transfer*, is unfinished. Besides these, she says, Alderman has an earlier version of the second volume, called *The Prime Years: John Dos Passos*.³

Why was the work never finished? Yvonne Evans, secretary to the director of Oklahoma University Press, very kindly researched some of the matter. The 1962 contract (which she had retrieved from storage) was for a work titled *John Dos Passos, a Work in Two Volumes*. It stated merely that the author would furnish, within a reasonable time, a manuscript to the publisher's satisfaction.⁴

Bernardin's sister Jacqueline says that Bernardin's wife told her that he was always revising, and his editor at Oklahoma University Press gave him extensions of dates to deliver the final manuscript. When this editor died, the people who succeeded him did not have the same interest.⁵ Bernardin's son Paul says that his father must have had the impression that Oklahoma University Press would publish one volume at a time. But at some point it told him that it would not publish the first volume unless it had the second. It wanted to do the two together.⁶

Bernardin seems to have become discouraged, and as a result to have changed his priorities. With Dos Passos' death in September 1970, and the consequent release of new source materials, Bernardin's task became more difficult. But he did not give up entirely, not even after younger biographers preempted him. Probably in 1981 he submitted a manuscript to Gambit, Inc., which had

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published Dos Passos' posthumous novel *Century's Ebb* and a posthumous volume of his letters. The publisher, Lovell Thompson, replied on January 29, 1982, that the projected biography was too long for Gambit; but he quoted his associate, Mark Saxton, as saying that it got "inside" the novelist more than did two other biographies, those of Melvin Landsberg and Townsend Ludington.⁷

Dos Passos' patience with Bernardin, despite his initial misgivings and subsequent weariness with the enterprise, speaks much for his friendliness towards and respect for fellow humans. Though Bernardin did not impress Dos Passos with his critical acumen, the novelist appreciated his industry and lack of pretentiousness, traits antipodal to those of writers whom Dos Passos once characterized as "inkshitters." Dos Passos also believed that some good might come of his setting the record straight, even if Bernardin's book were never published. And indeed good has come of Bernardin's industry and Dos Passos' cooperation. The novelist's responses, usually off the cuff, might be erroneous as to chronology, but such errors can often be corrected through the materials that became public after his death. Of course, a critical reader must make allowances for Dos Passos' attitudes towards people and events at the particular times of his responses. Still, some of the information about people and events, and his outlooks on them, would not exist at all if it were not for his responses.

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Notes

1. A chapter on the stays in Spain (1919-1920) of Dos Passos, McComb, and Dudley Poore, another of the novelist's college friends. For the letters between Dos Passos and McComb quoted in this article, see *John Dos Passos' Correspondence with Arthur K. McComb*, ed. by Melvin Landsberg (Niwot, Colorado: Colorado Associated University Press, 1991).

2. Daniel Aaron, *Writers on the Left* (1961).

3. This information appeared in a letter to the editor published in the January 2000 number of the *John Dos Passos Newsletter*.

4. Telephone call from Ms. Yvonne Evans, July 30, 2001.

5. Telephone conversation with Ms. Jacqueline Bernardin, July 26, 2001.

6. Telephone conversation with Mr. Paul Bernardin, July 24, 2001.

7. Ms. Jacqueline Bernardin sent the present writer a copy of Lovell Thompson's letter.

Rejoicing City that Dwelt Carelessly: From Orient Express to Ground Zero



*A*s we turn the pages of John Dos Passos' short travel book *Orient Express* (1927), his eight paintings, each reproduced on a page of its own, compel our attention. Almost all the paintings are impressionistic, with red, white, yellow, and orange predominating, and convey just how much of Dos Passos' Near Eastern trip was through deserts and oases, usually under a burning sun.

The author's narrative too is mostly impressionistic. We experience events, but not fully, and analysis is rare and usually fleeting. There is much terrain for the author to cover; he is overwhelmed by sensations and experiences; his verbal record is intermittent, and his visual one has only tenuous connections with the text.

We note that most of his paintings appear timeless. The costumes, the houses, the streets, the bazaars, the oases, the rugs could be from hundreds of years back. Despite Dos Passos' choice of subject matter for these paintings, it is clear throughout the text that he has a strong sense of

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history, though in his paintings he has chosen to emphasize the near-stasis of the area.

Dos Passos embarked on the Orient Express train from Venice in July 1921. After disembarking in Constantinople, he proceeded to the new Soviet republics on the Black Sea, where he witnessed unforgettable poverty, starvation and disease, all growing out of World War I. Afterwards he traveled in a Soviet railway boxcar to the border of Persia, and the next day took a train to Tabriz. From there he went in a dilapidated four-horse carriage to Teheran, then by automobile and train to Baghdad, where he arranged to travel on by camel caravan to Damascus. Dos Passos' narrative substantially concludes with his arrival in that city.

In March 1923 he wrote a friend that he was planning to write a "novel about New York and go-getters and God knows what besides." That novel, *Manhattan Transfer*, appeared in 1925. Although *Orient Express* was published two years after the novel, the Near Eastern experiences preceded *Manhattan Transfer*'s writing, and by their contrast with his experiences with New York, influenced the novel's form and content.

On the train from the Soviet Caucasus to Iran Dos Passos became friends with "the Sayyid," an Iranian who was returning to his country after completing studies in a German medical school. Dos Passos in *Orient Express* describes him as a strong proponent of political and technological change in Iran. In a railyard in Nakhtchevan, the author hears him "holding forth on Pan Islam and the resurrection of Persia." Later, in Iran, the Sayyid tells Dos

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Passos that he is the son of a "mujtahid, a very holy man," and if he had not gone abroad to study, he would have been a mollah, not a physician. Though not a Baha'i, he believes that all prophets have a bit of truth, and thinks highly of the Baha'is. "But the poor people," the Sayyid says, "were very ignorant and fanatic and believed whatever the mollahs told them."

For Persia to be a great nation it must industrialize, the Sayyid says. "I tried to tell him," Dos Passos adds, "that the life of an industrial worker in Europe and America was not all beer and skittles, and even wondered whether those people hammering away at their copper pots, miserably underpaid as they were, might not get more out of life than, say, the steelworker in Germany, for all his moving pictures and bierhalle with which to amuse himself."

Later, in Baghdad, an old Arab explains to Dos Passos that Great Britain and France had not acted according to Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points. "The American must tell his countrymen that the people of Iraq would continue to struggle for their freedom and for the principles announced by Sheikh Washiton and Meester Veelson." The Arab people would not, he says, be deceived with kings kept in power by the English.

Dos Passos' subsequent trip by camel caravan to Damascus lasted thirty-seven days. Protected by Jassem er Rawwaf, an Agail Arab who was a leader of the caravan, he survived raids by brigands which could have cost him all his possessions, if not his life. During the journey a discussion of America developed among the Agail. Some of their people had been there and reported that it was a

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place full of money. "I made a great speech," Dos Passos writes, "and said that if I had any sense I would live in the desert with the Agail and never go back; but they took it as a compliment and did not understand."

New York City, the subject of Dos Passos' 1925 novel, was the epitome of American industrial capitalism—the nation's financial, trade, and cultural center. The population in the city was huge, the anonymity unsurpassed, the economic competition hectic, the pace hasty, and the contrasts between rich and poor glaring. Dos Passos' book about New York is a collective novel, with scores upon scores of characters, many of whom appear infrequently, or only once. It covers twenty years of the city's history, beginning around 1900.

Although Dos Passos has a painter's eye for the lights and colors of the city, his emphasis is overwhelmingly on the society itself. The novel depicts the post World War I depression, the conformity that business success requires, the quiet and sometimes noisy desperation of countless people, the crooked actions of business and political leaders, the insipidity of the commercial theater, and the deportation of anarchists by the Federal government.

The third and final section of the novel begins after the end of World War I, and the period covered is nearly contemporaneous with that of *Orient Express*. Part I of that section, titled "Rejoicing City That Dwelt Carelessly," has Jimmy Herf, the leading character, returning from overseas married to Ellen Thatcher, a beautiful young actress. Herf is an idealistic journalist, but no one will

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pay him to write about society and events as he sees them. Since he is a “failure,” Ellen abandons Herf and agrees to marry the rising, dishonest politician George Baldwin. At the close of the book a penniless Herf abandons New York, desiring simply to get away from the city.

The novel again and again foretells Nemesis for New York. Thus in “The Burthen of Nineveh,” the final section of the novel—immediately following a section titled “Skyscraper”—a tramp in a park says to two boys:

“Do you know how long God took to destroy the tower of Babel. folks? Seven minutes. Do you know how long the Lord God took to destroy Babylon and Nineveh? Seven minutes. There’s more wickedness in one block in New York City than there was in a square mile in Nineveh. . . .”

On September 11, 2001, the rejoicing city that dwelt carelessly suffered an attack, not by Bible-citing activists, but by Muslim suicidals. And the twin towers of the World Trade Center were reduced to “Ground Zero.” Muslim elements like those who, according to the Sayyid, would believe whatever the mullah told them are vastly more dangerous today, in a shrunken and more technological world, than their counterparts could have been in 1921. As we ponder Ground Zero we spy not poetic justice but a zany conundrum.¹

Rereading *Orient Express* after September 11, we wish that Dos Passos had interrogated the Sayyid closely about those ignorant fanatics and their mullahs—were the mullahs calling for jihads? If so, against whom? But he

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had capitalist industrialism, not Near Eastern mullahism, on his mind in 1921.

And with adequate reason, as his “biography” of Henry Ford in *The Big Money* later demonstrated so memorably. Nor is capitalist industrialism anything to cheer about today; e.g., its incessant advertising denies our intellects and fogs our spirits. No writer has evident answers to our problems, but Dos Passos’ *Orient Express* and *Manhattan Transfer*, though of lesser magnitude than *U.S.A.*, can still give us light.

Notes

1. In contrast, the television evangelist Jerry Falwell two days after the attack said that God had allowed America’s enemies “to give us probably what we deserve.” Falwell later apologized. *Washington Post*, September 14, 2001, p. C03; September 18, 2001, p. C04. Both citations are from the World Wide Web.

The Best Times and The Education of Henry Adams

A Contrast



*T*he world is an entertaining though horribly trying place, and it is best enjoyed when one is young. It is only in reference to his youth that Dos Passos uses the title *The Best Times* for the memoir he published in 1966. How otherwise could the name apply to his experiences with World War I and the Sacco-Vanzetti affair? Friendship and travel are the major joys he describes in his 233-page book, which takes us from his birth to the years when *U.S.A.* was appearing. Sharing vicariously in his friendships and travels gives the book much of its savour.

I read recently that a Random House poll of literary critics has found *The Education of Henry Adams* the best work of non-fiction originally published in English in the twentieth century. Nobody asked my opinion, but if

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someone had I would have made a much more modest claim for *The Best Times: An Informal Memoir* (to use the full name). It is a neglected work, more sunny, more charitable, immensely more spirited, and at least as intelligent and interesting. Note that I do not claim that it, or any other book, is one of a select hundred.

Let us look first at each subject's achievements, a major source of our interest in any autobiography. And let us look too at what each wanted. Adams was an impressive historian, a journalist, the editor of the *North American Review*, and a Harvard professor. But a huge item in his account of his career was a strong grievance: the post-Civil War milieu did not allow him—a public-spirited and capable (as he saw himself) scion of the three generations of statesmen—to become president, or at least a leader in the nation.

Dos Passos was primarily a novelist, at his peak a great one, though never in *The Best Times* does he apply a yardstick to himself. He comes closest to the subject in the following passage, about his views in the early 1920s:

Literary invention could never be made really reputable. A writer who took his trade seriously would be sure to get more kicks than ha'pence. He would be lucky if he stayed out of jail. In my revulsion against wartime stupidities, as a priest takes a vow of celibacy, I had taken a private vow of allegiance to an imaginary humanist republic which to me represented the struggle for life against the backdrag of death and stagnation. Figures like Giordano Bruno, Erasmus, Rabelais, Montaigne presided over my republic of letters. Among its latterday saints I classed Shelley, Stendahl, Flaubert, possibly Walt Whitman and Rimbaud.

This isn't the sort of thing one talks about, even to intimate friends, but it is these private dedications that mold

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men's lives. In this context the number of copies a book sold was neither here nor there. The celebrity racket made no sense at all (134).¹

Like Adams fifty-eight years before, Dos Passos attended Harvard College, but compared to Adams he was a gamin. Adams in his first sentence relates that he was born on Beacon Hill in Boston in 1838 and christened later by his uncle, the minister of the First Unitarian Church. Being a great grandson of John Adams and a grandson of John Quincy Adams, he was at the pinnacle of social distinction from the start.

Dos Passos' memoir does not even say where he was born—in Chicago, far from his father's and mother's separate homes, as he was the unacknowledged love child of a married man. The novelist's paternal grandfather fell light years short of John Quincy Adams' distinction; he was, Dos Passos tells us, a short-tempered man who left Madeira in a rush because of "some incident involving a stabbing" (4). He worked as a cobbler and later as a shoemaker in Baltimore, then moved to Philadelphia, where he married and had children. Though the family was poor and had little food, Dos Passos' grandfather would throw dinner out the window if his wife hadn't prepared it just right. Dos Passos' father, a forceful person, became an outstanding lawyer despite his impoverished childhood.

Dos Passos was not baptized, a fact that discomfited proper people when he was a boy, and he did not bear his father's name at Choate, the preparatory school he attended. Indeed, there is more than a whiff of the picaresque in his memoir.

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Adams says he "made no acquaintance in college which proved to have the smallest use in after life" (64).² " . . . never would he have need of acquaintance to strengthen his social standing; but he needed greatly some one to show him how to use the acquaintance he cared to make" (64).

Dos Passos, unlike Adams, was hungry for friends who had personal qualities to which he could relate.³ He made many at college, particularly on the *Harvard Monthly*, and enlivens his memoir with accounts of numbers of them: E. E. Cummings; Dudley Poore, another poet; Stewart Mitchell, later a historian; Robert Hillyer, a third poet; Arthur McComb, who became an art historian, and two who died early, Edward Massey, a playwright, and Wright McCormick, a journalist.

Of the friends he made in Spain after college, he describes Jose (Pepe) Giner, a devout young man who knew "every sacristan and every forgotten masterpiece in the villages tucked away in the rolling lands of Castile" (30). Together the two walked through these lands and climbed in the Sierra Guadarrama. Another young Spaniard with whom he made trips, and who became a lifelong friend, was Pepe Robles, a cynical, sharp-tongued student who "laughed at everything," and was an "*aficionado* of bull-fights" (32, 33).

The secret behind his friendships was that he was receptive to a wide variety of human beings. In the years after World War I, for example, he, E. E. Cummings, and some of their friends found the Jewish East Side "particularly romantic."

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Saturday nights we would foregather at Moskowitz's "Rumanian Broilings" on a street east of Second Avenue.

Mr. Moskowitz was a courtly waspwaisted little man who played the zymbalom while we drank his wine. . . .

Sometimes we talked about the Russian Revolution with Yiddish journalists and poets. These were well-informed and skeptical people. . . . Mr. Moskowitz played well. He liked to feel he was an artist among artists. Sometimes he would be so moved by the enthusiasm of our response that he would distribute free wine (84).

Contrast this comment with Henry Adams', when he writes of coming into New York from Europe in 1868:

His world was dead. Not a Polish Jew fresh from Warsaw or Cracow—not a furtive Yacoob or Ysaac still reeking of the Ghetto, snarling a weird Yiddish to the officers of the customs—but had a keener instinct, an intenser energy, and a freer hand than he—American of Americans, with Heaven knew how many Puritans and Patriots behind him, and an education that had cost a civil war (238).

In the *Education* we see the American Civil War from England with Adams. He served as private secretary to his father, the U.S. Minister to Great Britain, who sought to keep that country from aiding the Confederacy with armaments and recognizing it as an independent nation. The climax of the account of diplomatic maneuverings comes when Minister Adams, trying in 1863 to stop the preparation and unleashing of two ironclad rams built for the Confederacy, informs Lord Russell, the British foreign minister: "It would be superfluous in me to point out to your lordship that this is war!" (172) Following his main thread, treating all his experiences as failures in his education, Adams tells how he misconstrued the intentions

6 *The Permanence of John Dos Passos*

of Lord Palmerston, the prime minister, and of Russell. Amid his accounts of his father's policies, he tells about how he himself fared in the London social season.

For Dos Passos, the most memorable war in his memoir is also the one he knew in his twenties: World War I in Europe. And he writes as a direct participant, often a front-line ambulance driver there. A pacifist and a socialist believing in revolution, he went to Europe because that was where the greatest and most momentous drama in the world was occurring. Once by the French front—and being twenty-one—he wrote of “building myself a snail shell of hysterical laughter against the hideousness of war” and “having a wonderful time” (51).

Education for Dos Passos came at every turn. Early in his activity on the road supplying Verdun, he and his friends Hillyer and Frederik van den Arend found a country villa that a shell had completely demolished: they were delighted, however, to find that it had a beautiful backhouse which was entirely intact. The three kept the place, with its scrubbed deal seats, their secret.

We had found the latrines the most hideous feature of the wartime scene, slippery planks over stinking pits. The Boche seemed to have an evil intuition about them; as soon as you squatted with your pants down, he would start to shell (42).

Does Henry Adams, in the five-hundred pages of his *Education*, written in an elevated diction nowhere descending to the plebeian, ever use a privy?

Before he left Europe, following his discharge from the Red Cross for writing pacifist letters, Dos Passos had

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a haunting experience. After an American offensive, probably Château Thierry, he answered a call for volunteers to work at a base hospital in Paris.

The night I particularly remember it was my job to carry off buckets full of amputated arms and hands and legs from an operating room.

Who could hold on to dogmatic opinions in the face of these pathetic remnants of shattered humanity? (70)

Still another part of his education came after he managed to get into the American army after his return to the United States. Now he was with ordinary American soldiers, not college volunteers; a farm boy from Indiana and an Italian from one of the western states helped him conceive of Chrisfield and Fuselli, two of the main characters in *Three Soldiers*.

"One friend in a lifetime is much; two are many; three are hardly possible," says Adams (312). For him in the *Education*, it was two: Clarence King, the geologist, and John Hay, the author and diplomat, who was Secretary of State under Presidents McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt. Writing of the deaths of these two, Adams says that it was time for him to go:

The three friends had begun life together; and the last of the three had no motive—no attraction—to carry it on after the others had gone. Education had ended for all three (505).

For Dos Passos, the gates of admission to friendship are wider, and the procession of friends, as he sees them, is long. To follow his memoir is to view this procession,

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and also his ability to bond with many kinds of people.

In 1921 he and Cummings sailed from New Bedford to Portugal on the freighter *Mormugao*. Before they left, Arthur McComb gave Dos Passos *The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma*, by Henry Adams and his brother Brooks, to read on the ship. Dos Passos says that he hated the book "because it went against the Walt Whitman-narodnik optimism about people I've never quite lived down" (87). From Paris he went on across the Balkans and Turkey, witnessing untold post-war horrors along the way. In New York, he had met Paxton Hibben, an American who had been a U.S. diplomat, then a war correspondent, and now was with the Near East Relief. The two were by this time friends. Hibben was unable to get him work with the N.E.R., but instead got him a document allowing passage in a Soviet railway boxcar to the Persian border. In the boxcar he formed a friendly relationship with a Persian physician, *Sayid* Hassan Tabataba, who was returning home from a German medical school, and together they travelled on to Teheran. After Dos Passos made his way, by car, wagon, and rail to Baghdad (as ever, noting terrain, customs, and monuments on the way), a sympathetic British official arranged for him to journey in an Arab caravan to Damascus.

Over five weeks of sometimes dangerous travel followed, under the protection of Jassem-er-Rawwaf, the tall, dark-bearded caravan leader. Once again in the memoir, Dos Passos displays his interest in and liking for people. Sitting at Jassem's campfire, he listens to the leader tell of his country in southern Arabia, and tries to explain how much he likes the life the Agail people live in the desert.

Jassam invites him to give up the "stinking cities" and come live with them (117). However, when Dos Passos has a shave in Damascus and puts on a western suit, Jassam, tears in his eyes, repudiates him.

In the chapters following that which describes the caravan, Dos Passos talks much more about his friends or acquaintances, those we have mentioned and others. Many are celebrities, among them F. Scott Fitzgerald, Edmund Wilson, Archibald MacLeish, Hart Crane, John Howard Lawson, Mike Gold, Picasso, Léger, Blaise Cendrars. Others are less well known, e.g., Dawn Powell and John Peale Bishop; still others are far from being public figures. None of the celebrities seems imported to gain the book notice; they were all very much part of his experiences. And however strong his liking, he can be memorable in judgment. Fond as he was of Cummings, he remarks of him: "Tolerance is not a New England vice" (134). Of F. Scott Fitzgerald, whose talent he admired, he says: "The idea of being that kind of celebrity set my teeth on edge" (130). Fernand Léger and Pablo Picasso were friends of Sara Murphy, another of his friends, and Léger became a favorite of Dos Passos; but of Picasso, he says: "He was skill incarnate . . . if he had had the gift of compassion he would have been as great as Michelangelo" (153).

Dos Passos in leading up to the cooling of Hemingway's friendship, has a memorable passage, not quite a page long, but too long to quote here. The gist is: "As a man matures he sheds possibilities with every passing year. In the same way he sheds friendships" (218-219).

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Hemingway had turned on his friend after Dos Passos denounced the activities of the Communists in the Spanish Civil War, and afterwards had wounded him with his comments. Dos Passos does not write of these later occurrences. But amid his more happy recollections of times with Hemingway, he has bits like: "Hem was the greatest fellow in the world to go around with when everything went right" (201). Quite deftly Dos Passos identifies the turning point in their relationship with an incident in Key West: Hemingway caught Dos Passos throwing his Panama hat at, and trying to ring, a plaster cast of a badly botched bust of his difficult friend (220).

By and large, though, Dos Passos' tone is one of fond remembrance, as with his recollections of John Howard Lawson, who had onesidedly ended their relationship when Dos Passos wouldn't stop denouncing the Communists.

Henry Adams' extensive descriptions of his travels in Europe, in the chapters "Berlin (1858-1859)" and "Rome (1859-1860)," are rich in commentary and sometimes skillfully pithy. But as he subordinates the information to his quest for education, one recalls them primarily as well-wrought cerebration.

To read Dos Passos on his trip through the Caucasus in 1928 is, on the other hand, not merely to participate in the trip, but to do so through the senses and mind of a novelist renowned for his ability to create place, as in *Manhattan Transfer* and *U.S.A.* A few sentences stand out in my mind:

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From the moment we left Shattoi—these names are all spelled wrong, I never could find them on any map—we were riding up one mountain pass after another. The guides would never take their horses farther than the next valley because it would be inhabited by a different people and they didn't know the language. The Russians were helpless as I was. At every night's stop we had to find fresh interpreters. . . . The uplands were sheep country. A shepherd we met on the road had never heard of America (184-185).

On part of the trip he travelled with Horsley Gantt, a Virginia physician who had been studying with Pavlov for years. The two Americans had met by chance in a Leningrad hotel, and they struck up a friendship that lasted until Dos Passos' death.

Near the start of Dos Passos' memoir, there is a longer and more vivid portrait than any of his others, that of his father. (From "The Camera Eye" in *The Forty-Second Parallel*, we know how difficult the relationship must have been. In *The Best Times*, Dos Passos writes of another side of it: his father's friendship and intellectual tutorship. In introducing his account of the elder Dos Passos, the son makes clear how much pent-up emotion he has felt:

For years a wooden box full of my father's letters has stood on my mantel at Spence's Point. . . . Time and again I have started reading the letters, but each time it has been as if a great fist squeezed my heart. I just couldn't go on (1).

Charles Francis Adams might have been an even more engaging subject for the son's memoir, but Henry eschews an intimate account. The father was a dedicated and skilled diplomat, who worked under trying conditions and with

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inadequate resources. His country, as the son makes clear, owed him much. But the relationship between father and son is shadowy, for the son's emphasis in telling of his years as private secretary is, as ever, on the failure of yet another episode in his quest for an education.

After Arthur McComb pushed Dos Passos to read *The Education*, Dos Passos wrote him in October 1922:

My apologies to Mr. Adams. *The Education* is by far the most interesting American document I've thus far encountered, and as a sourcebook for futitarianism is perfect. Imagine, it took him till he was 61 years of age to discover that woman's sex was a force in the world! The very unspicy pedestrian quality of it is vastly instructive.⁴

Dos Passos was intending, in part, to tease McComb. Adams' symbols endure as literature, though they are only curious relics as historiography. Many in the nineteenth century believed that science would constitute a model for the study of society. Thus Adams writes as a historian seeking to model his subject on what he thinks of as scientific method. But he is unable to discover continuity—as expressions of force—among historical periods. How does one draw a line from the Middle Ages, when the Virgin Mary energized a society to construct cathedrals, to the beginning of the twentieth, when the power of the dynamo makes one want to worship it?

What kind of education enabled one to succeed, whether economically, politically, or morally, in this world of increasing energy? *The Best Times*, while not posing Adams' recurring question, addresses it implicitly by the

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value to which it adheres—social sympathy.⁵ As for individual success, for Dos Passos it is in maintaining the ideals of his “imaginary humanist republic.”

While Adams’ *Education* is available in several editions—including a superb one, edited by Samuels, with appendices, variant readings, copious notes, a bibliography, and a good index—*The Best Times* is now out of print. Readers today need a second edition of Dos Passos’ memoir, retaining his illustrations, and adding an index, something I miss greatly in the first edition.

Notes

1. All page references to Dos Passos’ memoir are to *The Best Times: An Informal Memoir* (first printing). New York: New American Library, 1966.

2. All page references to Adams’ memoirs are to *The Education of Henry Adams*. Edited by Ernest Samuels. Riverside Edition. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1973.

3. Some readers may object to this contrast of Dos Passos’ and Adams’ comments on their undergraduate friendships, as well as contrasts of later matters, by saying that Adams was not writing an autobiography, but an account of an education. Ernest Samuels says that Adams did not authorize the subtitle “An Autobiography,” on the title page of the 1918 edition, and he therefore omits it from his own edition (xxiv). However, I know of no exemplary autobiography that is merely a catch-all. Every one has its theme or themes, and in this respect Adams’ book, with all its literary devices, and its subordinations, reticences, and omissions, is the “autobiography” he chose to write.

4. John Dos Passos and Arthur K. McComb. *John Dos Passos’ Correspondence with Arthur K. McComb*. Edited by Melvin Landsberg (Niwot, Colorado: University Press of Colorado, 1991), 200.

5. I am reminded of Walt Whitman’s line in *Song of Myself*: “. . . whoever walks a furlong without sympathy walks to his own funeral drest in his shroud.” Section 48 of the poem, in *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose by Walt Whitman*. Riverside Edition. Edited by James E. Miller, Jr. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1959.

A Novelist and

Appendix

Dos Passos to His Biographer Charles W. Bernardin

Four First-Published Letters

[Letterhead: 571 Commercial
Street
Provincetown, Massachusetts]
Jan 3 – 1942

Dear Mr. Bernardin,¹

Your suggested thesis is unfortunately based on a misconception, which is so current that I am taking a few minutes off to explain it a little. There has been current a tendency for many years to lump all forms of protest against our ways of doing things in this country (or better against our ways of doing things in the period 1919-1933) as communism. No description [sic] could be further from the truth, though there have been times when liberals and communists have worked together for certain specific aims, which they desired for very different reasons. Probably the only time I accepted, in my own mind, any large part of the Communist thesis (a class war, salvation by revolution, the destiny of the working class etc.) was in 1919-21 or thereabouts. The terrific events at Kronstadt woke me up—as they did some other American liberals

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who were confusing the Russian revolution with the spirit of 1776. From then on until the advent of Stalin to power I had a sympathetic interest in the Soviet Union—where I felt that it was possible that something very useful to the world might be being created. In this country I cooperated with Communists in various enterprises such as the New Playwrights' Theatre, their campaign for the coal miners in Kentucky and even once cast a "protest vote" for the communist candidates (192[8?]), but by 1930 or '31 I felt that Marxism was a very dangerous pseudo-religion with a fake scientific base (a little like Mohammedanism say—if you substitute Marx's real historical ability for Mohammed's peculiar statebuilding ability) and that from the point of view of the principles of 1776—the whole business was a dead end.²

The Sacco-Vanzetti case is an excellent example. The liberals were trying to protect our historic tradition by demanding a fair trial; the bulk of the agitation was carried on by anarchists or trade union workers, in the last month before the execution of the two men, the Communists horned in on the business and carried off two victims for their martyrology. The peculiar complications of this period, during which the totalitarian parties were developing, are of great historical interest, so if you are writing about it, let me beg you not to take any current phraseology for granted and to examine very carefully all preconceptions.

For my points of view towards communism at various times see

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*Journeys Between Wars, In all Countries. Harlan
Miners Speak*—testimony in Kentucky cases.
my pamphlet on the Sacco Vanzetti case.

To tell the truth my point of view towards politics has always been that of a reporter more than that of the addict of any particular philosophy, though I have considered it my duty to put in a word whenever I could for the underdog. The introduction to the *Ground We Stand On* is the only carefully thought out working up of a political creed I ever attempted.

Please dont write asking me where to get hold of books because I dont know—Best of luck with your thesis—

Sincerely yours

John Dos Passos

Notes

1. For a full identification of Bernardin, please see the accompanying article "A Novelist and his Biographer," on pp. 12-14 above.
2. Dos Passos' "protest vote" was in the presidential election of 1932. See his *The Theme Is Freedom* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1956), p. 101.

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Palisades, N.Y.

April 20 1949

Dear Bernardin,

It ought to be fairly obvious that my enthusiasm politically is for individual liberty rather than for any particular forms in the organization of production. Naturally I have sympathetic feelings towards the people who are trying to produce socialism through democratic means but my enthusiasm is for the democratic means rather than for the socialism. A good social aphorism would be that the means are more important than the end.

About religion there isn't very much to tell. The Quakers are the sect I most admire, though I have always been very much moved by the basic Christian story as dramatized among peoples of Spanish and Portuguese culture. Ask me about this ten or twenty years from now, if either of us lives that long. I'm answering your letters in a somewhat summary way, because I'm just about to pack up to catch a train. I'll be away for about a month off and on, on an article. If any questions come up that wouldn't take a three volume tome to answer drop me a line here so that I can pick it up at the end of the month when I come through.

Best of luck,

John Dos Passos

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Spence's Point, Westmoreland, Va
March 25 1950.

Dear Bernardin,

I saw part of Mme Magny's piece in some French paper and thought it was one of the best critical things I'd seen on the subject. Read like a German and write like a Frenchman's a hell of a good motto. I was just feebly kidding about your researches. Let's skip it.

Possibly the aunts and uncles in the early works you speak of come from the attitude of my aunts & uncles towards my mother and the irregular situation in which she found herself and my resultingly maverick relationship to her family. It seems to me now that a good deal of that "early revolt" business is pretty much a rubber stamp and almost an automatic part of the mechanism of puberty. Gesell and Ilg's "The Child from Five To Ten" gives you an excellent picture of the standardization of children's reactions and behavior. Incidentally it's a very useful work if you have kids of your own. If such a work were written about the adolescent from fifteen to twentyfive I think the "revolt" mechanism would turn out to be as standardized. There was a good deal of sullen resentment about my childhood—a pretty unhappy one on the whole—but it was certainly not directed towards my mother, who was ill, as the result of a series of light strokes and a high

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bloodpressure situation that doctors had at that time no means of coping with. From the time I was ten or eleven I had to attend to many household details and make decisions during the periods when my father was away. When we travelled I had to attend to tickets etc. and in periods when there wasn't a nurse, do all the nurse's chores. That all possibly made for a certain independence which has stood me in good stead in later life.

On the subject of my father's being a capitalist etc. you musn't forget that when they were being formed trusts were considered as progressive and had social approval, except for the populist reactionaries who clung to the good old days of the corner grocer. Thus unions are now considered progressive etc except by those who cling to the good old days of unrestricted power to the business man, and independence for the working people. To think clearly or historically you have to rid your mind of popular stereotypes. I've gnawed hard and long on this problem in *The Prospect Before Us*. My father like so many Americans of his generation always had a radical streak (Not using that adjective in its Greenwich Village sense). Even when he was profiting from trustifications and manipulations he was highly critical of them, as of all our institutions. As I [sic] child it was his unconventionality of mind that shocked and frightened me. His last years were spent working on a scheme for law reform in the interest of fairness and equality which he gave all his spare time to. He never could get the Bar Ass'n to endorse it and got to be considered rather a crank for his

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pains. I suppose I was so restless down here in Virginia partly because it wasn't the conventional summer resort life my schoolfriends and cousins were leading.¹ A boy in his teens worth his salt will be restless anywhere. Hell I was ambitious and wanted to see the world. It was only in my last years in college that I began to value my father's conversation and society. By the time I got really to appreciate him he was dead. These reactions are all standard in most men's growing up.

Cordially.

J.D.P.

Notes

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1. In the left-hand margin, Dos Passos wrote here: "There's nothing so conventional as children, except possibly adolescents."

address for May	c/o Dr Perrin Long
and June:	307 Thornhill Road, Homeland,
	Baltimore, Md.
	April 30 1950

Dear Bernardin,

That letter you sent me was probably as accurate as the average eyewitness account of an event.

There were periods when I occupied an apartment at 6 Patchin Place Jack Lawson rented by the year but didn't always use. By the way I agree with you about George Meredith, though it is many years since I read anything of his. When I was in college I read him thoroughly, and felt as you do that his poetry was very much underrated. At Peterborough Lodge we had a lot of Latin Grammar, Salust, and unless I'm mistaken some beginnings of Greek and I suppose reading, writing and arithmetic. I don't think I've ever felt [sic] for "Proletarian Literature" though in the twenties you are talking about I felt writing ought to be about people who worked and felt great enthusiasm for and curiosity about working class life in general. By the way, *Jews Without Money* is a tolerably good book or seemed to be when I read it. Mike Gold was quite a

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talented fellow in those days, though incredibly lazy. He was planning to be the American Gorki but ended by only emulating Gorki's vices and weaknesses.

My mother was a sincere Episcopalian of the low church Maryland and Virginian brand, though she wasn't much of a churchgoer. Popery was much dreaded in her family. Her Aunt Netty, an old lady of whom I was very fond, walked out of her church in Georgetown never to return when a new parson lit two candles on the altar. My father was always proud of the fact that his mother came of Quaker stock (though I believe that personally she was a Methodist). In the moral atmosphere in which I was brought up it was held as a truism that only a Protestant could possibly have any ethics: I can see that you were brought up thinking exactly the reverse. My father's beliefs were those of an eighteenth century Deist, though he was tolerant of religious forms and had several (I fear somewhat Epicurean) Catholic priests among his friends and drinking companions. He liked them for their tolerance and humanity. He also had a great respect for some of the narrow old Quakers he'd known as a boy in Phila-